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SIR JASPER'S TENANT

CHAPTER I.

HOW HE CAME TO SCARSDALE.

SEVEN o'clock on a fine dry October evening, and a red sunset behind the gaunt walls and bare windows of Roxborough Castle; red splashes of light upon the broad waters of the Merdrid river; lurid patches upon all the windows facing westward in the quaint old town of Roxborough; and in Sir Jasper Denison's park, and all the woods surrounding that grand old domain; long trails of crimson glory slanting between the brown boles of the trees, and creeping to darkness far away amongst the fern.

Seven o'clock, and the London express, due in Roxborough at twenty minutes after seven, was to bring with it Sir Jasper's tenant, the unknown personage who had hired a certain modest tenement, or shooting-box, hidden deep in the heart of Scarsdale wood, and let furnished by the Baronet to any respectable occupant who cared to give a decent price for a secluded habitation in a picturesque locality.

The secluded habitation was known as the Hermitage, which romantic title had been given to it by some sentimental occupant in days gone by. There was a story connected with it, a tragical story, such as generally belongs to a place of this kind: the story of a faithless wife, a midnight meeting, a servant's treachery, and a surprise—a shrieking woman locked in an inner chamber, and watching through a keyhole—a duel to the death, and then a flight on horseback through the black woods away to the open country, and the miry roads leading London-wards—an inquest at the Hermitage—a suicide found stark and stiff in a London lodging-house—and, last of all, a mad woman, living her dreary life for five-and-twenty miserable

years in the great mansion yonder in the park, and never uttering one coherent sentence in all those years, but in the paroxysms of her madness always doing the same things and saying the same words; always watching through a keyhole, and beating with frantic hands against a door, and screaming out that there was murder being done within.

There were many versions of this story, which may have been somewhat legendary in its character. It related to a noble race which was extinct, and to a time in which men wore fantastically frizzed periwigs upon their heads, and carried slim rapiers at their sides, always conveniently ready for any little impromptu in the way of an assassination in the badly lighted streets, or a duel to the death in some lonely chamber with locked doors.

If you had been an amateur artist on the look-out for a subject for a water-colour drawing, scarcely anything could have been better for you than the Hermitage, lying low in a deep hollow of Scarsdale wood, with trackless depths of fern stretching away to the left of its grim walls, and a still black pool lying to the right of the old ivy-grown gate surmounted by a stone escutcheon, and marking the boundary of a garden that was no more.

In a water-colour drawing nothing could have been more delightful than the queer gable-ends and heavy stack of chimneys, the small diamond-paned windows, the narrow deeply-set door, studded with knobs of rusty iron, the mossy stains and creeping parasites upon the wall, the rotting wood-work of the porch, and the general aspect of decay and desolation which pervaded the house and all that environed it. The black pool with a solitary heron drinking—and how thirsty the herons are in water-colours!—would have been the very thing for Suffolk Street, Pall Mall. A member of the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood might have made a good deal of those trackless depths of fern, and would mostly likely have been tempted to devote his chief strength to the broad fan-like leaves, the delicious gradations from tawny yellow to deep russet brown, from tender emerald tints to sombre depths of darkest green and purple.

Artistically regarded, the Hermitage was perfection; but when considered as a residence for a gentleman and his servant, there might be some difference of opinion as to its merits. Of course Sir Jasper Denison's agent, a West-end auctioneer, who had never seen the place, described it in his advertisements as a small paradise, eminently suited to the requirements of the most fastidious bachelor living. The Hermitage had been for a long time vacant, and the auctioneer's advertisement had figured in the *Times* Supplement at intervals during

the last twelve months, agreeably varied by some little artistic touch of colour in the description, so that its staleness should escape the detection of house-hunters. Bachelors with a taste for field-sports and retirement came to look at the Hermitage, and generally went away despondent. Half-pay officers in search of a cheap habitation, and prepared to endure a good deal in the way of damp and dulness, came to Roxborough puffed up with hope, and returned to London stricken down by despair. The damp and loneliness were something too much; the stone escutcheon on the gate was too suggestive of sweet Thomas Hood's Haunted House; the black pool and the splashing water-rats hinted *too* plainly at murders that had been done in the olden time; and the despondent house-hunter, stopping to refresh himself with a bottle of pale ale at the Scarsdale Arms, just outside the park gates, was apt to hear one of the goriest versions of the story about the shrieking maniac and the duel to the death.

Thus it was that the Hermitage had been untenanted for nearly a year; except, indeed, by a deaf old woman, who lived on friendly terms with the rats and mice, and was supposed to keep the house in order. The last tenants had been some riotous young sportsmen, who had laughed damp and dulness, ghastly associations and shadowy suggestions, to scorn, and who had committed terrible havoc among Sir Jasper Denison's preserves; who had consumed half a dozen bottles of French brandy in the space of a week, and had been more than once upon the very point of setting fire to the desirable shooting-box pleasantly situated in a gentleman's grounds. The riotous young sportsmen had clubbed together for the hire of a moor in Scotland this year, and for a long time it had seemed as if the Hermitage would stand empty all the winter. But one morning in October Sir Jasper's housekeeper had received a letter from the Baronet, then travelling in Italy with his only daughter and heiress, Marcia Denison, to the effect that a tenant had been found for the Hermitage; a tenant who was to be expected by the afternoon express from London on the 15th of October; a very methodical kind of tenant, it would seem, since he had answered the auctioneer's advertisement from Marseilles, and had replied to the auctioneer's letter of particulars by definitely hiring the house, and announcing his arrival at Roxborough by a certain train upon a certain day. He had lately returned from Central Africa; his name was George Pauncefort; and the reference he gave was to a highly respectable solicitor in Austin Friars.

Now the expected arrival of any tenant whatever at the Hermitage would have made subject-matter for discourse amongst Sir Jasper Denison's household, who found the low

summer days and the long winter evenings hang very heavily on their hands during that weary period of board-wages and individual half-pounds of butter and isolated half-shoulders of mutton, and that general scragginess which distinguishes the arrangements of a gentleman's servants when they are cast upon their own resources, as compared with the noble liberality with which they dispense the goods provided by their master. Sir Jasper's servants finding their lives very flat, stale, and unprofitable during the lengthened absence of the Baronet and his daughter, were glad to pounce upon any little conversational bone, and were not likely to drop it until the last shred of intellectual sustenance had been picked therefrom.

Any tenant at the Hermitage would have been a god-send; but a tenant who came direct from the centre of Africa was an inestimable blessing in a conversational point of view. The questions that opened up out of such a circumstance could scarcely ever grow stale, for they were never likely to be answered. It was like the proverbial Peter Piper over again. A tenant come from Central Africa to take Sir Jasper's shooting-box! But did the tenant really come from Central Africa? and if the tenant did actually come from Central Africa, what was the all-powerful motive which had brought him from one side of the globe to the other to take Sir Jasper's shooting-box?

There were warm discussions every evening in the housekeeper's room as to the tenant, and the tenant's possible habits and probable motives. What he was likely to do, what he was sure not to do; what he was likely to be like, and what he was certain not to be like; were so many phases of the grand question freely debated in that little coterie: and by the time the week had worn its slow length along, and the day indicated by Sir Jasper had arrived, every man and woman in the household at Scarsdale had created a separate ideal of the tenant who was to come to Roxborough by the 7.20 express.

Only one privileged creature was to enjoy the happiness of an early view of the voyager from Central Africa. This fortunate being was a groom, who, in accordance with Sir Jasper's wish that his new tenant should be treated with all possible courtesy, had been directed by the housekeeper to drive a certain four-wheel pony-carriage to the Roxborough station for the accommodation of the expected traveller. Unluckily, by that peculiar destiny which is perpetually planting the square men in the round holes, and *vice versâ*, the groom in question happened to be a person of a stolid temperament, quite unable to appreciate the privilege afforded him.

He drove into Roxborough to meet the new tenant as coolly as he would have ridden to Roxborough to meet a draught-horse for the farm.

How was he to recognise the tenant? This question had been duly discussed. The town of Roxborough and the military dépôt of Castleford adjoining, were busy places, and there were likely to be many travellers by the 7.20 express. In this case it was decided that the groom must trust to his instincts, and be governed by circumstances. Besides, he would most probably be guided by the brownness of aspect which must inevitably distinguish a traveller newly arrived from Central Africa. The housekeeper's last instructions to the young man enjoined him to look out for a brown gentleman, attended by his servant, and provided with an unusual amount of luggage.

The young man checked off his instructions upon the stumpy ends of his fingers, and then drove stolidly away through that delicious forest-land which to the chance traveller seems one deep mystery of fern and underwood. He drove through the dark avenues of oak and elm towards the winding road by the Merdril, across whose broad waters the walls of Roxborough Castle loomed grand and dusky in the sunset.

At twenty minutes past seven the shrill shriek of the engine cut the still evening air about the station. Of course the station at Roxborough stood inconveniently away from the town, and seemed cast down haphazard amid a dreary stretch of waste and swamp. If it had been otherwise situated, it would scarcely have seemed a station.

The privileged groom, standing at his horse's head outside the door from which the passengers by the down-train must emerge, waited very patiently for his private view.

He was not such a very stupid young man, after all; and it may be he was rather wanting in the higher attributes of ideality and the reflective powers than in the perceptive faculty; for he made no mistake in the business intrusted to him. He waited for the brown gentleman, and the brown gentleman came—a tall muscular-looking man, with a railway-rug over his shoulder, and a small portmanteau in his hand but entirely unattended.

The brown gentleman was walking off at a brisk pace, when the groom plunged a little way forward, touching his hat spasmodically in the endeavour to attract the stranger's attention.

"Sir Jasper Denison, Sir," he said; "trap, Sir—horse and shay; drive you to the Hermitage if you please, Sir; master's orders was every attention; and Mrs. Browning, she thought as how——"

"Oh, you've come to meet me," answered the stranger; "that's very kind and civil of your people. It's a long way then, I suppose, from here to the Hermitage?"

"A good four mile and a half, Sir. Shall I take your portmanteau, Sir?"

The small portmanteau was stowed into the phaeton, and the stranger took his place beside the groom.

The groom being constitutionally stolid—the stranger being habitually silent, very little was said during that four mile and a half drive. The traveller asked three questions: "Was Sir Jasper Denison at home?" "Would he be likly to come home yet awhile?" "Were there many country houses in the neighbourhood of Scarsdale?" When he spoke the tenant spoke very pleasantly, but very briefly. Having spoken, he relapsed into silence; and the groom observing him, as in duty bound, saw that he was very brown, that he wore a thick moustache, a closely cropped square beard, and that he made good use of a pair of dark eyes, which looked here, there, and every where through the dusk, observant of every changing feature in the rustic landscape.

The Hermitage looked absolutely cheerful to-night, for the deaf old woman had received orders from the great house, and had kindled big wood fires in the two most habitable rooms. The light of these fires gleamed redly through the diamonded-paned casements, in pleasant contrast with the black October night.

"You'll want some one to wait upon you perhaps, Sir, as your own man hasn't come yet," the groom said, as he alighted at the gate. "Shall I come back when I have put up the horse?"

The African traveller laughed pleasantly at this offer.

"My good fellow, you are very kind; but I have roughed it too long out yonder to be dependent on the services of a valet. My man comes down to-morrow with my luggage; till then I want nothing but a fire and a light, a loaf of bread, and a cup of tea. There seems to be some one in the house by the look of it."

"Yes, Sir; there's an old woman, Jim Tursgood the farm-bailiff's mother; very respectable, Sir, but uncommon deaf."

"She'll be able to get me all I'm likely to ask for. Tell Sir Jasper Denison's housekeeper that I thank her for her civility in sending the phaeton. Good-night."

"Good-night, Sir, and thank you, Sir"

The stolid groom touched his hat and drove away; the richer for a halfcrown piece which the tenant had dropped into his hand, and very well content with the result of his

errand. The tenant went into the Hermitage, upon whose fire-lit threshold the deaf old housekeeper bobbed perpetual curtsies.

The African traveller seated himself in a big old-fashioned arm-chair by the fire, and took off his hat, revealing a handsome, or perhaps rather a noble-looking head, crowned by a forest of short dark hair. He glanced round the low oak-panelled room with a grave contemplative gaze, in which there was little of either curiosity or interest: and yet the place looked cheery and pleasant enough to-night, as such places will when seen in the luminous glow of blazing logs burning redly on a wide open hearth. The dark open wainscot, the queer old bureaus, with brazen locks and handles twinkling in the uncertain light; the eight-day clock ticking hoarsely in a shadowy corner; the old japan china jars, cracked so much and mended so often as to be reduced to a perfect patchwork of porcelain; the peacock's plumes and tiny Indian tea-cups on the high mantelshelf; the grim arm-chairs and faded Turkey carpet; all these had a certain element of the picturesque even in their ugliness; and a traveller who had slept under canvas, upon the stony plateau of the Hammada, might consider himself very well off in the common sitting-room of the Hermitage.

After that long contemplative stare Mr. Pauncefort took a bunch of keys from his waistcoat-pocket, and opened the small portmanteau, which he had flung on the table near him. It was a shabby little portmanteau; scratched, and grazed, and torn, and battered, and was adorned more or less with the labels of almost every railway company in Europe. From this portmanteau Mr. Pauncefort produced a tin canister, a meerschaum-pipe, and a packet of tea. The old woman asked if there was **anything** she could get for the gentleman. Nothing but a teapot, some boiling water, and a cup and saucer, Mr. Pauncefort told her briefly.

She departed to remote regions at the back of the Hermitage, and returned presently with the stereotyped tea-tray, a big loaf, a pound or so of butter, and a tea-kettle, which she set upon the red logs,—a sputtering, hissing, blustering kettle, the voice whereof sounded pleasant in the fire-lit chamber. Then the old dame demanded with many curtsies if there was anything more she could do? She was very anxious to be retained by the strange gentleman. Her services generally went along with the cottage, and she had an agreeable recollection of the wild young bachelors of the last year, who had left their brandy-bottles in cupboards undefended by locks, and had never been quite certain whether their housekeeper was in a state of chronic intoxication during the entire period of their

residence, or whether it was the old woman's normal condition to be very hazy in her intellect and rather unsteady on her legs.

Sir Jasper's tenant being left to himself, made his tea, after a manner that smacked rather of foreign travel than of domestic habits. He took a great handful of the raw material and dropped it into the tea-pot, which he filled with boiling water, and then set down among the feathery ashes on the broad stone hearth. Then he filled and lighted his black-muzzled friend the meerschaum, and sat for a long time blowing big clouds of smoke, and staring dreamily at the red logs, which changed to a deeper glow, and then grew dim, only spitting out little jets of blue-and-yellow flame now and then as they broke and smouldered into a mass of frail grey ash.

What is he like, the tenant? now seen vividly, now very dimly by that fitful light. What is he like? and is there any special charm about him whereby we can be expected to be interested in him as he sits moodily smoking the big black meerschaum, and staring at the fading fire?

He is not handsome, not in the common acceptation of the word, which I suppose involves something like perfection of form and colour. He has strong features, boldly cut; deep thoughtful eyes, darkly brown or darkly grey; it is not easy to discover their precise hue in this uncertain light. There is some touch of melancholy in the exceeding gravity of the face, a sombre settled shadow, which makes the man seem older than he is. You guess his age to be something between thirty-five and forty; but you know instinctively that he looks older than he should look, and that any lines lurking here and there about his face have been sharply and suddenly cut by the cruel hand of care, and not gently pencilled by the gradual touch of time.

He laid aside his pipe by-and-by, and poured out his tea; strong black stuff, such as Hazlitt the critical was wont to brew for himself. Mr. Pauncefort poured the black fluid into a basin, and drank it without any alien accompaniment of milk or sugar.

It was late by the time he had finished the black decoction, and the old woman came in to ask if he wanted anything more. No, nothing more.

"My bed-room is overhead, I suppose?" Mr. Pauncefort inquired.

"Yes, Sir."

"Then you can go to bed when you please."

Mrs. Tursgood curtsied and retired to the unknown regions appropriated to her. The tenant filled and lighted his meer-

schaum for the second time, stirred the pallid logs into a faint blaze with the toe of his boot, and threw a heap of fresh wood on the hearth. The hands of the hoarse clock in the corner pointed to half-past ten ; but Mr. Pauncefort had evidently no intention of going to bed yet awhile. You cannot expect an African explorer to be tired by a journey from London to Roxborough.

He opened the casement-window and looked out into the quiet woods. The moon had risen, a young pale moon as yet, but old enough to give a faint silvery light, beneath which the silent woods, the still black pool, the glorious depths of tangled fern, appeared mysteriously beautiful. Sir Jasper's tenant dropped into a chair that was set against the window, rested his folded arms upon the sill, and sat thus for a long time motionless, absorbed, looking straight before him, with a solemn melancholy in his face.

"An English wood," he murmured at last, "English ferns and English foliage. How beautiful, how unutterably beautiful it all seems to me after the rank luxuriance of the tropics, the burning barrenness of the desert, the gigantic horror of African mountains under an African sky ! Fifteen years—fifteen wearisome useless years since I last set my foot upon this English land, and I have the courage to come back at last. I sometimes think it was a presentiment that must have prompted my coming. *Mourir au gîte*, says the old proverb. I have seen the bones of travellers bleaching amongst the yellow sand, and I should scarcely have cared to die in Africa. I should like best to lie under a wooden cross in a rustic churchyard, with the shadow of a solemn old yew for ever on my breast, and the sonorous peal of village-bells for my Sabbath lullaby."

CHAPTER II.

UP AT THE GREAT HOUSE.

THE tenant's servant arrived at the Hermitage early the next day in a Roxborough fly, that was heavily laden with luggage. Other luggage was to come in the course of the day ; cases of books, and a bath, and trunks, and portmanteaus of all kinds. Mr. Pauncefort evidently intended to establish himself for some time at the Hermitage. The servant was brown like his master, and grave like his master, and about the same age as his master ; but there ended all resemblance between the two.

The servant, though ordinarily reserved in speech and manner, could relax upon occasion, and reveal a cheerful, not to say jovial temperament; and this the master never did. If Mr. Pauncefort smiled, his smile was evidently the smile of courtesy, and took no radiance from any light within the man. A very superficial observer might have discovered that some one great sorrow had given a gloomy colour to the character of the grave and silent gentleman who had newly taken possession of Sir Jasper's shooting-box; but George Pauncefort was the very last amongst creation to parade his feelings or sentiments before the eyes of his fellow men. He affected none of the stereotyped gruffness and brutality of the misanthrope. He gave himself none of those disagreeable airs, familiar to the playgoing public, in the person of Mrs. Haller's ill-used and weak-minded husband. He was only very quiet, very anxious to avoid all notice, and to live his own life unobserved and solitary. The dreariness of the Hermitage, before which so many would-be tenants had fled despairing, was an attraction for this man. Established in the low old-fashioned parlour, with his cases of books unpacked, and the dusky brown-backed volumes ranged on neat shelves fitted and fixed by a Roxborough carpenter; provided with a perpetual supply of pale Turkish tobacco, and that friend and familiar the black-muzzled meerschaum, Sir Jasper's tenant seemed perfectly comfortable. "The heart may break, yet brokenly live on," exclaimed that poet who so dearly loved to make the most of all woes, real and imaginary; and who never so thoroughly enjoyed himself as when he was tearing the bandages off his freshest heart-wounds for the edification of the reading world. "The heart may break," and yet a man may eat his dinner, and smoke his pipe, and sleep soundly o' nights, only disturbed now and then by some broken dream in which he feels the touch of the vanished hand, and hears the voice that is still. The heart may break and the man may hold his own in the world. Those are not the least useful, or the least agreeable members of society, whose hearts are broken. The great main-spring is shivered for ever, but all the little wheels go on. The one pure joy, which made life worth living for, has vanished into outer darkness; but there are low sensuous pleasures, fine houses and delicate wines, and Chelsea china; and if the man with a broken heart has only a sufficient balance at his banker's, he may turn collector, and give his mind to Dutch pictures or Queen-Anne teapots, as the case may be. Henry I. of England never was seen to smile after the wreck which lost him his son and heir; but the faithful historian who tells us this, tells us also that the bereaved king died of a surfeit of lampreys.

Mr. George Pauncefort, always grave and quiet, was yet

sufficiently genial in his manner towards those few people whom he encountered in his simple and solitary existence. The gossips who speculated about him were unanimous in declaring that he was "quite the gentleman," "one of y'r regular thorough-bred uns," according to the horsey members of Sir Jasper Denison's establishment.

Mr. Pauncefort had been for many months a tenant of the rustic little habitation in the wood, before he crossed the threshold of that splendid mansion whose Tudor chimneys glimmered redly across the park. He had carefully avoided the neighbourhood of the great house, preferring to take his solitary rambles deep in the heart of the wood, where few but poachers or keepers ever strayed; or far away in the pleasant open country. But when he had been some eight months in possession of the Hermitage, a certain matter of business took him to Scarsdale Abbey. It was the simplest matter, and one that his servant could have easily transacted for him. But George Pauncefort was one of those men who have a habit of waiting upon themselves, while the pampered retainers enjoy an elegant idleness. He had gone far afield upon this day, and in striking out his own road homewards across the park, which was always open to him, he came very close to the front of the Abbey.

It was then that he remembered that he had been for the last day or two hindered from writing to Sir Jasper Denison, to demand permission to make some trifling alterations in the stabling behind the Hermitage, by the want of that gentleman's address.

The grand portico entrance of the house was some distance from him, but there was an old-fashioned little door in a turret at one end of the building, very near the spot where Mr. Pauncefort stopped to contemplate the mansion. This door was open, and a portly, rosy-cheeked, grey-haired woman, who wore a silk gown and a prim white muslin cap and apron, was standing in the doorway, talking to a groom and caressing an enormous dog of the Mount St. Bernard breed. This woman was no less a person than Mrs. Browning, Sir Jasper Denison's housekeeper.

Mr. Pauncefort walked straight to the little doorway, and speedily obtained all necessary information about the Baronet's probable address; but he did not find it very easy to escape from Mrs. Browning's society. She had never before had a good view of Sir Jasper's tenant; and she was determined to make the most of her opportunity. Would he not like to see the Abbey? she asked. People came hundreds of miles to see the Abbey. There wasn't a creature in the county who had not seen it; and this being a nice bright day, with a good light

for the pictures, how could the gentleman better employ himself than by inspecting the Vandyke gallery, and the Reynolds dining-room ?

This, or something very much to this effect, Mrs. Browning demanded with considerable earnestness and animation.

"Lor', now, to think of your being the best half of a year living at Scarsdale, next door to us as one may say, and never coming to see the Abbey ; and it one of the show-places of the county too ! I suppose it's through having been so long abroad, Sir, that you don't seem to take any interest, I dare say, in English scenery, and English houses, and such like."

The housekeeper said this in quite a sympathetic tone, as if she were able to imagine a certain state of feeling in which show-houses and show-pictures might become indifferent to the mind satiated with foreign splendours and foreign art.

Mr. Pauncefort sighed as he answered her.

"No," he said ; "I am very fond of England. Nothing that I have ever seen elsewhere, nor any length of absence, have weakened my love for my native country."

He spoke slowly ; rather like a person who is thinking aloud, than like one who answers an ordinary question. His thoughts seemed to wander away as he spoke ; and for some moments he looked absently across the sunlit park, with the same sombre shadow on his face that had darkened it when he looked out on the moonlit woodland on the night of his first coming to Scarsdale.

The housekeeper watched him inquisitively. There was so much about him to afford material for speculation, and she was so anxious to make the most of her opportunity.

"Then you *will* step in and look at the pictures ?" she said presently.

Mr. Pauncefort hesitated a moment, and then replied with a half-indifferent shrug of his shoulders : "Yes, if you are really so good as to wish to show them to me. I have no doubt they are very well worth seeing."

That indifferent consent was enough. Mrs. Browning curt-sied ; and George Pauncefort crossed the threshold of a house which he had hitherto scrupulously avoided, and which he had intended to avoid to the end of his tenancy of the Hermitage.

Mr. Pauncefort submitted very patiently to the usual ordeal to be undergone by the inquiring individual who inspects a show mansion. Mrs. Browning pelted him with that little hailstorm of hard facts which the cicerone lets down upon his or her victims. The Vandykes, in a long gallery at one end of the Abbey, were no doubt very fine ; the Florentine mosaics, the huge Indian vases, were of course worthy of Mrs. Browning's encomiums ; but the only thing George Pauncefort lin-

gered long to look at in any of the grand apartments was a little Dutch interior, hanging in a badly lighted corner of the panelled drawing-room.

They came out of this drawing-room into the great marble-paved hall—a splendid but very chilly-looking apartment, with a domed ceiling painted by Lely; and with gigantic equestrian portraits of dead-and-gone warriors looming forth gloomily from the walls. Swinging-doors of massive plate-glass opened from this hall into the portico; and by one of these doors Mr. Pauncefort would fain have made his exit, after presenting a very handsome fee to the housekeeper; but that lady was bent upon detaining him still longer.

“You haven’t seen half the house yet, Sir,” she said; “or not more than half of it, anyhow. You’ve only seen what Miss Denison calls the historical end of the Abbey. Some of the best of the pictures are in the private apartments, which are never shown to strangers; but I shall be happy to show them to you, Sir, not being a stranger, as one may say.”

Again George Pauncefort hesitated; and again gave way. A man’s will in regard to the trifles of life generally bends beneath a woman’s, be she whom she may. It matters so little, he fancies, which way so small a matter is decided; and it is by granting her sovereignty over these little matters that we allow woman to rule the universe. Only let Jeanne du Barri sit upon the arm of King Louis’s chair, and pull his wig awry, and presently you will have Choiseul sent away into exile, and all France disorganised for the pleasure of a plebeian favourite.

Again Mr. Pauncefort shrugged his shoulders, and followed Sir Jasper’s housekeeper whithersoever she chose to lead him. She opened a pair of baize doors, and led the way into a long and spacious corridor, where the light from a broad Tudor window at the extreme end was made dimly splendid by the gorgeous colouring of the arms emblazoned on every alternate pane of glass. The window was built in a deep recess, on each side of which there were quaint old cabinets filled with oriental china, and surmounted by huge mandarin jars. A pair of old-fashioned arm-chairs with slim legs and stiff straight backs, and a chess-table with a set of carved-ivory pieces ranged under a glass shade, stood in the window; and it was very easy to fancy a cavalier with love-locks falling loosely on a point-lace collar and velvet jerkin, and a lady of the E. M. Ward school, bending over the chessboard in the rainbow-tinted splendour of summer sunshine streaming through the old window. It was a charming spot, the very scene of all others for a quiet flirtation on a summer’s morning—or for more earnest converse in the mysterious

glimmer of moonlight, shining with fantastic glory on the polished oaken floors and wainscots. It was a spot in which a lover's voice would sink instinctively to a whisper ; a spot in which a sublime unconsciousness of all the past and a perfect recklessness as to all the future were apt to creep into a man's mind, leaving only a delicious sense of present enjoyment ; a delightful resting-place upon the weary highway of life ; a sunny oasis where it seemed " always afternoon," and summer afternoon, perfumed with the mingled odour of ripe apricots and clematis floating through an open casement.

The Tudor window overlooked a walled flower-garden. Miss Denison's garden it was called ; an old-fashioned unpretending pleasance, with prim parterres bounded by overgrown box borders ; a garden that was rich in roses and honeysuckle, and all simple flowers ; in rare old fruit trees that stretched their gnarled limbs wide and far upon such a wall as builders rarely fashion nowadays ; a wall propped up by solid bastions of brickwork, but which seemed notwithstanding to have been slipping down into the earth for the last century ; a lop-sided top-heavy old wall, about which grey mosses and creeping things clung tenderly, while foxgloves and stonecrop crowned it with flaunting crests of red and yellow.

Looking through a small opening in the Tudor window, Mr. Pauncefort seemed more attracted by the quaint old flower-garden, where the yellow butterflies were wheeling above the roses, and where a big lazy bee made a monotonous booming in the cup of a tall white lily, than he had been by any of the catalogued grandeurs on the other side of the Abbey.

" It's a queer old-fashioned place," Mrs. Browning said, almost contemptuously, " but Miss Marcia won't allow any alteration ; not so much as the transplanting of a rose-bush ; it was her ma's favourite garden, and Miss Marcia seems to cling to everything that was in any way connected with her ma."

" You spoke of Miss Denison just now," observed Mr. Pauncefort, still looking out into the sunlit garden ; " and now you speak of Miss Marcia. Are there two Miss Denisons ? "

" Not now, Sir. There was another Miss Denison, but she died. She was a very beautiful young person ; not so clever perhaps as Miss Marcia, but much handsomer, and more aristocratic like, quite a queen she looked ; but you'll see her picture in Sir Jasper's study, so I needn't say anything about that. She was engaged to be married to Mr. Percival Mannering, of Stoke Mannering, one of the wealthiest gentlemen in the county ; but her horse took fright one day on the Roxborough Road and ran away with her. She wasn't as

good a horsewoman as Miss Marcia, but she had a fancy for spirited horses, and I've heard the grooms say this one was a regular brute. He threw her on a heap of stones that were lying on the side of the road. She was brought home to the Abbey, and before midnight there were five doctors standing round her bed. But she never spoke again, nor knew any one, and she died the next evening just as it was growing dark."

"A terrible calamity for her father."

"It was indeed a calamity, Sir. He was just like a madman. I was standing in the room when Miss Denison died. Sir Jasper was kneeling by the bed holding both her hands, as if he was trying to hold her back from death, somehow, by the force of his own will. I never, in all my life before, heard anything like the shriek he gave when the poor girl, who had been wrestling and struggling like in her agony, fell back upon the pillows dead. It was one of those sort of things you can never get out of your head. Sir Jasper is rather a stern, proud gentleman, not given to express his feelings much about anything; but he was wrapt up in his eldest daughter."

"And how long has Miss Denison been dead?"

"Nearly five years. Sir Jasper left the Abbey directly after the funeral, and he has never been back since. I sometimes think he never will come back again. I never saw any one so changed as he was in that one week after his daughter's death. She was just coming of age, and her birthday would have fallen about a month after the accident. There were going to be all manner of fine doings at the Abbey; for it had been settled that she should be married on her birthday, and both events were to be celebrated at once. There was nothing too grand or too good for Miss Denison; and Sir Jasper spent as much money and took as much trouble about all the arrangements as if he'd been going to receive a visit from the Queen of England. If anything could make the poor dear's death seem more sad, it was the fact of its happening amidst all the bustle of these grand preparations. Sir Jasper sent for me into his study the night Miss Denison died, and gave me his orders about her rooms. They were to be kept just as she had left them. Nothing was to be moved—not a book, nor a scrap of needlework, nor anything that her hand had ever touched; the flowers in the vases on the tables and mantelpieces were to be left to wither away: the music was to remain as she had left it, scattered about the piano. He took me with him and went into her sitting-room and dressing-room. I never shall forget his face as he looked round the rooms. I'm sure I don't know *why* it should be so; but I know that the sight of an open book with a cambric handkerchief lying across it, just as it had been dropped there care-

lessly before she went out, *did* make it seem harder to believe that she was dead and gone from us for ever. Sir Jasper shut and barred all the shutters with his own hands, and then he locked the doors of both the rooms, and gave me the keys. The doors were never to be opened unless there was a necessity for the opening of them. There was to be no dusting, or cleaning, or meddling with them in any way ; and there never has been. No one has ever been into those rooms but me ; and I'm sure when I do go there I always feel as if I was in a grave, and expect to see Miss Denison's white face looking at me out of the dusk at every turn."

"But the other young lady,—Miss Marcia, I think you called her,—she must have been a great comfort to her father in his affliction," observed Mr. Pauncefort. He was in an idle humour this hot summer afternoon, and inclined to be interested in the history of Sir Jasper's family. That listener must have a very hard nature who does not feel some touch of sadly tender interest in a story of youth and beauty suddenly blighted by the relentless hand of death. The housekeeper raised her eyebrows with a dubious expression. Whatever Mrs. Browning might have been in the days when the Abbey was fully tenanted, and her own time fully occupied by domestic duties, she was now an incorrigible gossip, and would have been content to stand for an hour together in the sunlit corridor, discoursing about the absent family.

"As for Miss Marcia being a comfort to our master," she said, sinking her voice to a confidential tone, "I don't know about that. I can't take upon myself to say whether she would, or whether she wouldn't. You see the truth of the matter is, Sir Jasper did *not* seem to take to Miss Marcia. He married twice, as I dare say you may have heard ; and those that know him best do say that he married the first time for love, and the second time for money. The second Lady Denison was a Miss Jones, a very rich young lady ; but her father was something in the City, and the county families wondered at Sir Jasper's making such a match. The first Lady Denison was one of the Hetheringtons of Castle Hetherington, a very high family. She was a beautiful young creature, but she was the youngest of nine, and she hadn't a sixpence to bless herself with. She died a fortnight after her first baby was born ; and from the hour of the child's birth—or I should say from the hour of the mother's death—Sir Jasper seemed to act as if his daughter Evelyn was the only creature he cared for on this earth. He married Miss Jones two years after his first wife's death. She was a gentle, pleasant-spoken lady, not one of your regular beauties, but very sweet-looking, with mild timid ways, just as if she felt herself out of place in this great house.

I don't say that Sir Jasper was unkind to her ; for my master is quite the gentleman, and I don't think he'd be unkind to any one. It seemed more as if he overlooked her like, almost as if he *couldn't* bring himself to think of her, or pay much attention to her, he was so wrapped up in his little daughter. Anyhow the poor lady wasn't happy. She didn't cry, or fret, or complain, or anything of that kind ; and I've heard the men-servants say that she always smiled and seemed to light up like w^{hen} Sir Jasper talked to her ; but she faded away very, very slowly ; so slowly that no one was frightened about the change in her looks, or the feebleness that grew upon her as the time went by. Her baby was born a year and a half after her marriage ; and oh, dear, how she did cling to that baby ! But I think her greatest grief came upon her at the birth of that child, for she couldn't help seeing that Sir Jasper didn't care for it. It was nearly three years afterwards when she was lying on her death-bed, very ill and very feeble, but mild and patient and gentle to the last. It was just a few days before she died that I heard her say to my master as he sat by her side, ' I should like to see you kiss my little girl, Sir Jasper, if it was only once in all your life ; let me see my darling in her father's arms this once before I die.' Sir Jasper gave a little start like, and took his youngest daughter on his knee. I do believe it was the first time he had ever held her in his arms from the hour of her birth."

" But I suppose Sir Jasper was sorry when this poor neglected wife died ? "

Mrs. Browning shook her head thoughtfully.

" He seemed more stunned and dazed like, than sorry," she said. Lady Denison's death came upon him very sudden, for he never seemed to have seen that she was seriously ailing. It was only common for the family-doctor to be hanging about the house, first to see one of the children, and then to see the other ; and though he'd been attending Lady Denison for the three years after her baby's birth off and on, she was so quiet and made so little complaint, that scarcely any one knew that there was anything amiss with her. I knew ; for my lady was very friendly with me, and would ask me to sit down sometimes when I went to her room to consult her about anything, and would keep me talking for an hour at a stretch. ' Dr. Daniel tells me there is nothing really the matter,' she would say to me ; ' he says there is only want of tone.' I couldn't help thinking that Sir Jasper would take more to Miss Marcia after her poor mother's death ; but he didn't ; he only seemed to get more and more wrapped up in Miss Evelyn. I'd been many years in his service, and I'd served his father before him, so he used to ~~speak~~ very freely to me. ' I'm a

most unfortunate wretch, Browning,' he said to me one day after the second Lady Denison's death ; ' and everything that I love seems to come to an evil end.' His daughter Evelyn was standing by his side as he spoke, and he put his hand upon her head and lifted up her face. I never shall forget the look he gave her. He didn't speak another word ; but I know as well as if I'd been able to read his thoughts, that from that time there was always a fear in his mind that his eldest daughter would die. He kept her with him for one-and-twenty years, and he seemed to grow fonder of her every year ; and just when she was dearest to him he lost her. There are some of our folks wicked enough to say that her death was a judgment upon him for his treatment of Miss Marcia."

" Did he treat his younger daughter badly, then ? "

" Oh, dear no, Sir. He only seemed to overlook her somehow, just as he'd overlooked her poor mother. He never spoke unkindly to her ; but she might be in the room with him for an hour together without his speaking to her at all. I had a good deal to do with the management of the two children, and their nurses and governesses and masters, and such like, and in all the time I can't remember any one act of Sir Jasper's that you could call unkind. If he was ordering anything particular for Miss Evelyn, he seemed to forget her sister ; but if I said to him, ' And Miss Marcia, Sir ? ' he would answer directly, ' Yes, of course ; let Marcia have everything that is proper : that is understood.' "

" And did the little girl feel her father's want of affection ? "

" I think she did, Sir. She was very quiet, but not timid, like her mother ; rather proud and independent like in her ways ; fond of waiting upon herself, and not caring to take a favour from anybody. She was very fond of her sister, and would always give way to her in everything, and had a kind of protecting manner with her, as if she'd been the elder sister instead of Miss Evelyn. Poor Miss Evelyn was a regular spoilt child to the very last, and it seemed sometimes as if she couldn't move hand or foot without her sister's help. Marcia was not more than seventeen when Miss Denison died, but she was more a woman than her sister for all that ; and when the accident came, and Sir Jasper was like a madman, and there was scarcely any one in the house fit to do anything, the doctors said that if Miss Marcia had been a hospital-nurse of fifty years old, she could hardly have done better than she did. But goodness gracious me, Sir, I might keep you here all day talking like this, and I'm sure I beg your pardon for running on so ; only when an old woman begins to talk of a family that she's lived with for nearly forty years of her life, you can't wonder if she finds plenty to say."

The grave dark face of Sir Jasper's tenant betrayed no weariness. He was interested in this every-day story of a slighted childhood, and a noble womanly nature poorly appreciated by those who should have held it the dearest of all earthly treasures.

It seemed as if in every corner of the world, for ever and for ever, quiet sufferers were bearing their burdens meekly and silently. "Ah, what a sorrowful universe it is!" thought Sir Jasper's tenant; "forgotten wretches starving silently in loathsome garrets and cellars; beautiful women stricken by sudden death in splendid mansions; and all the power of wealth and science too weak to save them; passionate love unable to shelter the object of its devotion; and even a child, an innocent unoffending child, born with the stamp of a sorrowful destiny upon her, and called upon from the cradle to bear her small part in the universal drama of suffering!"

"I should like very much to see Miss Marcia Denison's picture," Mr. Pauncefort said presently.

The housekeeper looked at him doubtfully.

"It was Miss Evelyn's picture I spoke of, Sir," she replied; "Miss Evelyn was the beauty, and her portrait hangs in Sir Jasper's study. It was painted by a very celebrated artist, I believe, though the name has slipped my memory."

"But there is a portrait of Miss Marcia somewhere, I suppose?"

"Well, I don't know, Sir! and yet, when I come to think of it, there is a portrait painted by Miss Marcia herself. It hangs in the room that used to be the young ladies' school-room, and that was afterwards Miss Marcia's own sitting-room. She was always very clever with her pencil, and used to spend the best part of her time in drawing, and writing, and reading. Her sister used to call her a blue-stockings; for, you see, the two young ladies were so different, Miss Denison being all for gaiety and pleasure, and Miss Marcia all for study and loneliness."

"I should like to see Miss Marcia's picture."

"Yes, Sir, but you'll see Miss Denison's portrait first, won't you? It's considered a very fine painting, let alone being such a good likeness."

Mr. Pauncefort assented; and the housekeeper conducted him to Sir Jasper's study,—a noble room, lined with books from floor to ceiling, and fragrant with the odour of Russia leather; rather a severe looking apartment altogether, with two white-marble busts on massive black-marble pedestals keeping guard over the door, and a bronze Neptune sitting grim and stern above a group of fierce sea-horses on the top of the solemn faced clock, which formed the sole ornament on the broad marble chimney-piece.

Above this bronzed Neptune hung the only picture in the room—a portrait, in kit-cat size, of a very beautiful young woman, with a perfect profile and large dark eyes, but with something of the gorgeous colouring and classic regularity of feature which have become vulgarised by a hundred different examples of the same young woman; now caressing a dove, and labelled Amanda; now smirking above a sleeping baby, and entitled Maternal Affection; anon simpering under the shadow of oriental head-gear, and dubbed Zuleika; but always equally adorned with all the splendour of dark eyes, glowing cheeks, pouting lips, and a straight nose.

Evelyn Denison's portrait was the picture of a beautiful woman, but not an exceptional woman. Beatrice Cenci looks at us out of a square of painted canvas across half a dozen centuries, and we believe in her and pity her, and her rare beauty makes an image in our minds that never melts or mingles with any other image; but there are pictures of lovelier women than Beatrice, which fade away from our memories five minutes after we turn from the wall on which they hang.

"Miss Denison must have been a very beautiful girl," said George Pauncefort; "but I fancy she was one of those people who are born to have love wasted on them by higher natures than their own. I should like to see Miss Marcia's portrait."

This was the third time Mr. Pauncefort had expressed the same desire. He was interested in the story of the daughter who had not been loved. Perhaps the dull monotony of his own life rendered him peculiarly liable to feel such an interest. Those who try to reverse the natural order of things must be content to pay some penalty for their presumption. If Canute had been in earnest when he asked the tides of ocean to retire from that Southampton shore, and the waves *had* obeyed him, they would most likely have recoiled only to return with a mightier rush and drown him. The hermit who withdraws his sympathy from his fellow-men very frequently ends by devoting himself to the study of spiders and caterpillars. Mr. Pauncefort, who had for eight months studiously avoided all communication with his neighbours, found himself all at once wasting a midsummer day in listening to the rambling talk of an old woman.

He was not to see Marcia Denison's portrait yet awhile. Mrs. Browning insisted upon taking him through the blue drawing-room, and the amber drawing-room, the billiard-room and my lady's boudoir, still called by my lady's name, though the Baronet had been nearly twenty years a widower; and it was some time before she brought him to a room on the upper story, a large sunny room opening out of a wide gallery, and

simply furnished with maple-wood chairs and tables, and chintz hangings.

This was Miss Marcia's room. It looked like the apartment of a woman of thirty, rather than a girl of seventeen. Two capacious book-cases were filled with books of no common or frivolous character. There were an easel and a pile of folio volumes in one corner of the room, and a little old-fashioned rosewood piano in another. The walls on three sides of the room were hung with maps, which had formed a part of the school-room furniture; but the wall above the mantelpiece was adorned by a great many water-coloured sketches, all evidently the work of the same hand.

The hand was not perhaps that of a genius; but it was that of a person gifted with a strong natural talent, which had been very fairly cultivated. There were vigour and grace in the drawing of the sketches; and, if the colouring was a little tame and cold, a shade conventional, it was at least free from the glaring hideousness which pervades the work of some amateur artists who aspire to follow in the footsteps of Etty.

The sketches were chiefly portraits. There was the picture of a man of about five-and-forty, with an aquiline nose and dark hair, just a little sprinkled with grey, whom Mr. Pouncefort set down as Sir Jasper Denison. There were several sketches of the Baronet's elder daughter: now a three-quarter face, radiant and smiling, crowned with a wreath of flowers; now a profile with the large dark eye glancing coquettishly upwards from under the shadow of an elegant bonnet; now a full face beaming under a broad Spanish riding-hat and a plume of cock's-feathers. No one looking at these girlish pictures could well fail to understand that Marcia Denison had been very fond of her sister. It seemed as if she had never lost any opportunity of glorifying the dead girl's beauty; and every one of the sketches bore in its careful manipulation and finished colouring the evidence that the work had been a labour of love.

There was one profile very differently handled: the merest sketch, with only a little colour to light it up here and there; but, like most careless sketches, instinct with a life and vigour which had been lost in the more finished pictures. This little sketch was Marcia Denison's portrait, drawn by her own hand. George Pouncefort looked at the simple little picture with a pensive interest. It was not the portrait of a beautiful girl; but Sir Jasper Denison's younger daughter possessed that which was wanting in the face of her handsome sister—a special character, by which it might be distinguished from the faces of all other women. It was a pale face, with a delicate little aquiline nose; a small but rather prominent chin; a broad forehead, with the hair growing rather low upon it; and

dark grey eyes. The hair was a warm brown, rippling at the temple, and pushed away from the small ear. The outline of the cheek was very perfect, but its colouring cold and pale. One of the greatest charms of the sketch was the bend of the long slender throat, like the drooping curve of a wild hyacinth. In the attitude of the small head, and the expression of the thin lower lip, there lurked a quiet melancholy, which would have revealed itself to Mr. Pauncefort even if he had not known so much of Marcia Denison's history.

"I like her face better than her sister's," he said, as he turned away from the chimney-piece.

"Dear me, Sir," cried Mrs. Browning; "you're the first person I ever heard say such a thing. We none of us ever thought Miss Marcia a beauty."

Mr. Pauncefort smiled

"I didn't say I thought her a beauty," he said; "I only said I like her face. One doesn't always like the beautiful faces best. Miss Denison is the sort of woman a man marries on the same principle as that on which he buys a pair of carriage-horses, or the lease of a big house in Tyburnia—simply because the wife, or the horseflesh, or the house, may be the very best and most splendid of its kind. Miss Marcia Denison is a woman who may go down to her grave unwooed and unwedded, or she may meet the one man on all the earth destined to love her to distraction. You may take my word for it, Mrs. Browning, if any man ever does fall in love with that girl, her influence will hold him to the last hour of his life."

Mr. Pauncefort laughed at his own earnestness as he finished this speech.

"I did not think it was in me to be so much interested in anything as I have been in your family history," he said; "I really have to thank you for a very pleasant morning."

The housekeeper curtsied and simpered:

"I'm sure I'm very glad you've been amused, Sir; and I hope we shall see you often at the Abbey when the family comes home," she said, glancing rather doubtfully at Mr. Pauncefort's shabby shooting-jacket, and wondering whether he possessed a dress-coat in which to appear before the magnates of the land.

"Oh! the family is coming home, then?" said George Pauncefort, evidently surprised.

"Well, Sir, Sir Jasper did say in his last letter that he should be back at the Abbey before Christmas; but he said the same thing the year before last, and he didn't come. He spent last winter and the spring in Rome; and now he's in Germany drinking the waters some where; but there, I always forget the names of these foreign places."

"And he is likely to return before Christmas?"

"Well, you see, he says so, Sir, in his last letter."

Sir Jasper's tenant was very thoughtful as he walked slowly homeward across the sunlit greensward of the park, and through the dusky gloom of the thick woods. He had loitered for nearly three hours in the rooms and corridors of the Abbey, looking at the pictures and listening to the housekeeper's rambling talk.

"Humph!" he muttered; "if these people come back, I must find another hiding-place. I don't want to be patronised by Sir Jasper Denison, or stared at by Miss Marcia's young-lady visitors. *She* would neither stare at me, nor pry into my business. She is a self-contained young lady, who asks sympathy from no one, and will sympathise with very few. Between the story of her life and the little sketch of her profile I fancy I can make out a pretty clear idea of that young lady's character."

The daily papers were lying on a table when he entered his sitting-room at the Hermitage. He had been fifteen years a wanderer in the wildest and loneliest regions of this earth; but in all those years he had never lost the Englishman's imperishable love of his daily newspaper. Even to-day, when his mind was occupied by forebodings of possible annoyance from the return of his landlord's family, he took up one of the papers with a greater show of eagerness than he was wont to exhibit.

The first paper which his hand fell upon was the Supplement of the *Times*. His eyes ran along the list of births, marriages, and deaths, as if, hermit though he was, some slight interest in the affairs of his fellow-men still lingered in his breast. At the sight of a name among the record of deaths, a dark change came over his face, and a sudden shivering shook him from head to heel.

"On the 4th inst., at Naples, Leonora Fane, relict of the late Major Weldon Paget Fane, H. E. I. C. S., aged 41."

George Pauncefort crushed the newspaper in his strong hand, as if in that iron grasp he would fain have crushed out the record on the printed sheet. "If it had been the other, he cried—"if it had been the other! Oh, my God, will the wicked wish never be granted?"

CHAPTER III.

WAS HE WISE?

THE summer waned slowly, very slowly for that quiet dweller in Scarsdale Hermitage, whose monotonous days were unbroken by any event, almost unvaried by so much as a communication from the outer world.

Those who took care to keep themselves well acquainted with George Pouncefort's habits were aware that he received scarcely any letters. The man who carried letters and papers to the big house rarely went out of his way to penetrate the thickets amongst which Mr. Pouncefort's retreat lay hidden. The newspapers were duly sent from Roxborough station every afternoon, and by their means alone was Sir Jasper's tenant made acquainted with the great political tempests and the small social ripples on the tide of human life. He was not a talking man. His servant had travelled with him for fifteen years, sleeping in the same tent with him in the desert, resting with him by lonely wells under the shadow of African mountains, sharing dangers from man and beast; and yet there was little confidence or familiarity between the master and man. The servant kept his place as well as if he and his employer had never quitted Belgravia. He was a model retainer, a Protean domestic, entirely free from the pretentious cleverness, the bustling activity, common to your Jack of all trades. He could cook a dinner, or groom a horse, or lay-out the paraphernalia of his master's toilet, with equal despatch and completeness: but his service at the Hermitage was a very easy one, for Mr. Pouncefort's habits were almost as simple as those of an anchorite, and he had an absolute aversion to anything in the way of obsequious attention. Indeed, to sit late into the solemn quiet of the chill hours that follow midnight, reading in heavy brown-backed folios or quaint black letter volumes; to smoke bowl after bowl of Turkish tobacco in the black-muzzled meerschaum,—seemed Mr. Pouncefort's only idea of domestic enjoyment. His days he spent in rambling far and wide about the fair pastoral country, utterly reckless of, and indifferent to, the changes in the weather, seeking out hidden-nooks and world-forgotten villages, dotted on broad masses of common land, or lying deep under a cluster of towering hills. Sometimes, after wandering very far afield, he would take a night's shelter in some remote village inn, little better than a beershop as to its capacity for accommodating travellers.

Unlike most reserved men, George Pauncefort was able to make himself at home anywhere, and would smoke his black-muzzled companion in a chimney-corner, amidst a little cluster of village bumpkins, with as much apparent satisfaction as in the solitude of his own chamber. Perhaps he was rather self-contained than reserved in disposition. He was entirely independent of his fellow-men—or as entirely so as any human creature can be : but he in no way resembled the conventional misanthrope ; and if circumstances called upon him to do so, he could let himself down to the level of the commonest and most ignorant of his kind without any awkward creaking of his intellectual machinery by which the letting-down process might be betrayed. He never attempted to patronise ; he never made the faintest effort to assert his superiority ; he wore a threadbare shooting-coat, and riding-boots that were rusty with long wear ; but he never yet had found the rustic boor so slow of perception as to fail to recognise his position as a gentleman.

I have said that George Pauncefort carried upon him, so deeply branded as to be visible even to the most ignorant eyes, the stamp of some great sorrow ; a sorrow of the remote past, it seemed to be ; a sorrow that had been conquered and lived down, leaving the conqueror enfeebled by the anguish of the struggle, scarred by the bitter blows dealt against him in the long fight, but not utterly shattered. Time had passed, and he had buried his great trouble, and had trampled on its grave ; but the ghosts of such bitter agonies will haunt us long after the woe itself is past and dead ; and the man calling himself George Pauncefort had his phantom. In dreams, in the dread wakeful hours of the quiet night, the spectre arose before him, the old pangs rent him, the cicatrised wounds opened again to pour forth new torrents of blood—that impalpable heart's blood which we shed in such an agony.

Do you remember that story—a madman's story, as I think—of a man who murdered his enemy, and ever after, so long as he lived, on the anniversary of that hideous day, found the corpse of his victim, and had to get rid of it ? Once he found the loathsome thing lying in his berth at sea, and was fain to summon up unnatural strength, and hurl it into the ocean ; on another anniversary he came upon it in the desert, and buried it deep beneath the burning sands. But, let him bury it or hide it wheresoever or howsoever he would, when the dreaded day came round, the thing was there, and his work had to be done again. Does not this story seem something like an allegory ? Surely there are some amongst us who have slain a sorrow and buried it,—not once, but many times,—only to find the dreadful thing lying in wait for us in the quiet of our chambers ?

But it is possible to smile and talk pleasantly enough with our fellow-men despite some lurking dread of that possible corpse lying up stairs, and *not* polite enough to confine its horrible intrusions to any given day in the year. The broken hearted people manage somehow to hold their own in the world. All through the bright autumn weather Mr. Pauncefort found life as agreeable as life can well be to a man who has neither wife nor child, father nor mother, nor even the "bosom friend, dearer than all." Whatever pleasure can be derived from the solitary contemplation of English landscape, amidst the copses and valleys, the hills and streamlets, of one of the fairest of English shires, was his. Whatever delight a man can derive from his favourite authors and his favourite tobacco was also his. The days were rather monotonous, perhaps; very slow in their progress, very brief to look back upon, for they melted imperceptibly one into another, like the hours that pass in a dreamless slumber, leaving no mark behind them. It was only when he saw the fern redden under the sombre shadow of the spreading oaks that he could well bring himself to believe he had been for twelve months a dweller in the Hermitage.

Yes, October had come again, and the first year of George Pauncefort's tenancy had expired; a very quiet and peaceful year, leaving no more interesting record behind it than the bill of the West-end tobacconist, who supplied Sir Jasper's tenant with mild Turkish. October had come again; and early in the month George Pauncefort found himself once more on the long terrace in front of Scarsdale Abbey.

An insignificant accident had led him thither in the bright midsummer sunshine; an insignificant accident brought him there now in the still October afternoon. One of the clumsy old chimneys at the Hermitage had given signs of imminent decay, and Mr. Pauncefort came to make some common inquiry of Sir Jasper's housekeeper respecting the proper people to set about the necessary repairs. He had been away on one of his rustic expeditions for the last two days and nights, and had returned to find the thatched roof of the Hermitage in jeopardy, and the deaf old woman tormented by vague fears as to the chances of being buried alive at any moment under the ruins of a falling habitation.

It was only in search of a bricklayer that Sir Jasper's tenant came to the Abbey in the low yellow light of an autumn sunset; only in search of a bricklayer, and he found—what? The opening chapter of life's romance is generally very commonplace. Even on the stage, where the beautiful and the ideal are supposed to be paramount over stern reality, the grandest tragedies are apt to begin with the conventional

greetings of two gentlemen meeting in a street, or the vulgar talk of a first and second citizen.

George Pauncefort was in rather a dreamy mood this afternoon. He had exhausted a good deal of physical energy during his rambles of the last eight-and-forty hours, and a pleasant languour had succeeded the active frame of mind that is generally engendered by mountain-air and pedestrianism. It was pleasant to him in this dreamy state of feeling to linger a little on the terrace, watching the red sunlight fade behind the western woods; and he lingered. The best pleasures of his life were only such pleasures as these—a dreamy sense of rapture in the still beauty of a twilit landscape, a gentle happiness in the contemplation of a glorious sunset. He lounged with his arms folded on the broad stone balustrade, watching the fading light, and quite unaware that there was anything but a long row of blank windows behind him, when the creaking of a hinge roused him from that most delicious state of mind popularly known as “thinking of nothing.” He turned quickly, and found himself face-to-face with a lady who was standing on the threshold of an open French window. One glance at the pale face upon which the low light was shining was quite enough to reveal the lady’s identity. The little aquiline nose, the broad forehead, the rippling brown hair pushed away behind a delicate rosy-tinted ear, were very familiar to him, though he had only seen them once in a schoolgirl’s careless sketch of her own profile. Marcia Denison had one of the faces that are always remembered by those who look upon them—not for their beauty, but because of their individuality. Amongst all the faces in a crowded ball-room, Sir Jasper’s tenant would have been able to select the face of the girl whose sorrowful story had beguiled him in the idle hours of a summer’s day.

She was a woman now, with a well-bred woman’s perfect self-possession; and her look and attitude, as she stood with her hand on the fastening of the open window, were sufficient to tell Mr. Pauncefort that she had opened it on purpose to speak to him. He took off his hat as he approached her.

“Miss Denison, I believe,” he said; and then, as the graceful head was slightly bowed in assent, he added, “I really have to apologise for giving myself up to the contemplation of nature from a stand-point exactly in front of your window; but I had no idea that the family had returned. I came to make some inquiries of Sir Jasper’s housekeeper.”

“Papa has heard of the fallen chimney, and will be very glad to talk to you about it, if you will be good enough to come into his room. He is an invalid, and cannot venture out in this autumn weather.”

Mr. Pauncefort passed through the window at which Miss Denison had been standing, and found himself in Sir Jasper's study. The bronze Neptune was looming darkly upon a grey-haired weary-looking man, who reclined in a low easy-chair, with his head lying back upon the cushions, and his worn but handsome features lighted up by the glow of a great coal-fire, upon the top of which burned a huge log of wood. The room was oppressively warm; but Sir Jasper gave a peevish little shiver as he turned his head towards the open window by which his tenant had entered the room.

"My dear Marcia, how much longer are you going to keep that window open?—I beg your pardon, Mr. Pauncefort. Very happy to see you, and make your acquaintance; but sorry to do so under the disadvantage of an east-wind. Pray sit down. You don't care to come nearer the fire? Ah, I thought as much. You are a hardy pedestrian, I hear; a traveller, with all manner of terrific advantages to boast of. You please yourselves, you others! For my own part, I never outstep the limits of civilisation. Civilisation has been three or four thousand years coming to me; and I really don't see the justification for running away from it.—Marcia, more coals."

Miss Denison laid her hand upon the bell. She was standing at the corner of the mantelpiece, with her elbow resting on the broad slab of marble; and in the dim glimmer of the firelight the tall slim figure, so statuesque in its perfect repose, looked almost like the image of a mediæval saint keeping guard over a tomb. Sitting on the further side of the room, and at some distance from her, George Pauncefort had ample time to contemplate Marcia Denison; while the chilly Baronet discussed the condition of his tenant's retreat, and debated the advisability of calling in an architect to survey the premises.

"The place has been lapsing into decay for the last fifty years," said Sir Jasper. "There has been piecing and patching going on, more or less, ever since I can remember. The country people rejoice in the falling of a chimney or the crumbling of a wall; and put down all dilapidations to the account of a certain gentleman, in a silken jerkin and golden lovelocks, slaughtered in a duel under that ivy-mantled roof. Do you ever see any ghosts at the Hermitage, Mr. Pauncefort?"

"A good many; but not the ghost of the fair-haired cavalier."

"Ah, you brought your phantoms with you, I suppose. Well, my dear Sir, we must do our best to make the place comfortable with a little more patching and piecing; in the meantime, if there is the slightest apprehension of danger,

I beg that you will take up your quarters in this house until the bricklayers have set things right. I shouldn't mind spending a little money upon the decent restoration of the old place ; its traditions are worth something ; and there are dark stains on the flooring of the lower room, which stand very well for blood. I shouldn't mind spending money, if I thought you would care to retain your present abode for any length of time. A respectable tenant—a single gentleman of quiet habits—is always the highest desire of a landlord's heart. Seriously, then, Mr. Pauncefort, how long do you purpose inhabiting the Hermitage ? ”

“To tell the truth, Sir Jasper, the question is rather perplexing to me. I have been thinking of——”

He stopped abruptly, with his dark eyes bent on the ground. For fifteen years before this autumn evening, he had not once been a guest in a decent English home. The atmosphere of Sir Jasper's study was new to him ; the quiet presence of a well-bred woman stirred him with a faint thrill of pleasure, engendered out of the very novelty of the sensation. For fifteen years he had been a wanderer in the wildest and loneliest regions of the earth ; and the glimmer of firelight in a handsome chamber, the rustle of a woman's silken gown, the fitful glimmer of diamonds on a slim white hand, were almost as strange to him as they might have been to the rudest peasant-lad weeding turnip-fields for sixpence a day upon Sir Jasper's estate.

“You were thinking of leaving us,” said the Baronet, taking up George Pauncefort's unfinished sentence. “I'm not surprised to hear it. The Hermitage is an unlucky place ; and I don't suppose any respectable tenant will endure a long lease of its gloom and ruin. I'm sorry to think we are likely to lose you ; for I had looked forward to some social winter evenings, in which you might have indulged us now and then with a graphic sketch of African adventure. I should really have enjoyed a little vicarious peril and privation. What can be more delicious than to exist for three days and nights without food or water ?—to feel the ponderous paw of a lion on your chest, and his hot breath on your face, while a dull numbness stagnates your blood, and holds you as powerless as some heavy sleeper under the thrall of a nightmare ?—to spend half-a-dozen hours, holding on for dear life, at the top of a palm-tree, with a tropical sun blazing above your uncovered head, and a hungry tiger prowling below your dangling heels ?—in short, to have all the sensations of danger whose actual risk and anguish have been endured by other people ? To be frank with you, Mr. Pauncefort, I have a fancy that there ought to be some sympathy between you and me. I have turned my back upon the world for the last few years of my

life, and have lived as much apart from my race as a man can live who is too much a Sybarite to dispense with the comforts of civilisation, and too much an invalid to exist without medical science. I think there must be a little of the misanthrope in your nature, or you would scarcely have held out for a twelve-month against the dreariness of Scarsdale wood. However, you can hold out no longer, and you are about to leave us. I ought to have anticipated as much."

Miss Denison had seated herself in a low chair opposite her father. A little table stood near her, with a heap of new books and magazines; and she was cutting open the leaves of a periodical with a paper-knife, whose jewelled handle glimmered fitfully in the firelight. Sir Jasper's tenant found himself absently following the motions of the white hand and the glittering knife. It was so very long since he had seen an elegant woman sitting at a comfortable fireside, while the autumn wind was moaning dismally in the outer gloom beyond the curtained windows, like some banished wretch exiled for ever from the sacred shelter of home. He looked at the quiet figure, whose harmonious lines melted one into another and blended imperceptibly with the warm shadows of the background, almost as he might have looked at a picture. He looked at the quiet figure, and remembered the story of Marcia Denison's childhood. The neglected girl had grown into an elegant woman, with a certain calm beauty of her own,—a beauty of form rather than colour or expression. There are plants which will flourish without sunshine; but they are generally pale fragile blossoms at the best. Marcia Denison had grown to womanhood without the warm light of love; and George Pouncefort was beguiled by the fancy that a stranger might have read something of her story from her face and manner. The perfect self-possession, the graceful repose, seemed to be the natural attributes of a woman from whose life all passionate emotions had been banished. No fierce throbs of jealousy had ever rent her bosom; the hopes and fears, the painful uncertainties, the agonising doubts, which wait upon the happiest of earth's affections, had never shaken her nature from its placid repose. An elegant woman, a lady in the highest sense of the word, Marcia Denison looked calmly out upon a world which had given her little joy, and could scarcely bring her any very terrible sorrow.

Mr. Pouncefort hesitated a little before he answered Sir Jasper's very friendly speech. The paper-knife travelled steadily on: the white hand appeared and disappeared as the light of the burning log leapt up into sudden life, or died away into darkness; fitful and shadowy as those spirit-hands of which we hear so much nowadays.

"I certainly have been thinking of leaving this part of the country," George Pouncefort said at last; "but I really have neither decided upon when I should go, nor where I should go. I have been so long a traveller, that English life is apt to seem a little tame and flat. As for the dreariness of my present quarters, *that* has never been disagreeable to me. I am fonder of a book and a pipe, or an early ramble on a great waste of common-land, than of all the gaieties of the universe. There are very few reasons why I *should* leave the Hermitage—perhaps scarcely one substantial reason—and there are many inducements for me to remain. Sir Jasper, will you permit me to ask you a question, and will you believe me when I assure you that it is not an impertinent one?"

"With all my heart."

"You said just now that you had turned your back upon the world. Am I to attribute any real significance to that expression; or, in other words, am I to understand that you are not likely to fill the Abbey with visitors? I know that I have no possible right to ask such a question; but one of the chief delights of the Hermitage has been that it really *is* a hermitage. I am so much a misanthrope as to dread the invasion of jovial young sportsmen among the fern and underwood that surround my den."

"Then you may banish all fear of any such infliction," answered the Baronet decisively. "You may have heard, perhaps, that a great affliction fell upon me some years since. From that time to this I have lived a solitary life, now in one place, now in another. My daughter Marcia has been good enough to endure all my fancies, and to resign the associations and amusements which are supposed to be necessary to a young lady's happiness. She has relations who would be very glad to find a brighter and more fitting home for her; but she is so kind as to prefer remaining with me. You need fear no sporting youth amongst the fern, Mr. Pouncefort. I have no intention of filling my house with people I don't care about, or ruining my health in a futile attempt to sustain the popular notion of a good old English squire. I came back to Scarsdale because—because I was utterly weary of all the rest of the world, I think; and I mean to live my own life in defiance of the frowns of all the county. I don't believe in the common talk about a rich man's duty to society; and I don't feel myself called upon to turn my house out of windows in order that there may be waste and riot in the servants'-hall, and extortionate profits for the Roxborough tradesmen. I fancy that a man has a right to his own life and to bear his burden after his own fashion. It is only your hired jester who is bound to swallow his tears, and be merry at the

pleasure of his audience. No, Mr. Pauncefort, there will be no high-jinks at the Abbey because Marcia and I have returned. It will be only a big empty house, with two very quiet occupants, who will always be glad to see you when the natural sociability of the gregarious animal is strong upon you, and who will not be offended with you for stopping away at other times. And now I suppose it's a settled thing? You will stop; and I may send the bricklayers to patch up the Hermitage to-morrow."

"You are very good. Yes, I shall consider myself settled for some time to come. If you would wish me to take the place for a term of years——"

"Not at all. A willing tenant and an agreeable acquaintance I shall be delighted to retain; but an unwilling tenant may shake the dust of Scarsdale from his shoes whenever he pleases to do so. You will dine with us to-day? The second bell will ring in five minutes. Bah!" exclaimed Sir Jasper, answering a doubtful look with which George Pauncefort regarded the rusty sleeve of his shooting-coat, "never mind your dress. Do you think we cannot take any pleasure in your society because you don't happen to wear the regulation swallow-tail and cambrie cravat? For my own part, I dine in my dressing-gown, and am limited to wretched slops, prescribed by my medical man. There will be fish and a chicken, I dare say, for my daughter; and if you appreciate the lighter Rhine wines, you will have no cause to find fault with my cellar."

A great bell, clanging high in a windy cupola, pealed out upon the night; and an elderly and stately-looking butler announced dinner almost at the same moment.

"Come, Mr. Pauncefort, we are of the Diogenes family. Pray let there be no ceremony between us. Give your arm to my daughter, and forget all about your shooting-coat."

The Baronet lifted himself out of his easy-chair, and stood erect upon the hearth,—a tall weird-looking figure, in a long ruby-velvet dressing-gown, which rather resembled the robe of some alchemist or astrologer of the darker ages than the costume of one of Burke's landed gentry. Mr. Pauncefort offered his arm to Marcia Denison almost involuntarily, for he was more inclined to refuse than to accept his landlord's invitation; and the next minute he found himself following Sir Jasper to the dining-room with Sir Jasper's daughter on his arm.

"I assure you that it is a real act of benevolence to stay with papa," she said, during the short progress from the study to the dining-room; "he is always so much better when he has pleasant society."

They dined in a snug little oaken wainscoted chamber at one end of the corridor; and before the fish was removed George Pauncefort found himself entirely at his ease in the society so unexpectedly thrust upon him. Sir Jasper expanded under the influence of a boiled sole and a glass of hock. He was a man who liked to hear himself talk, and who could talk pretty well, in rather a superficial manner, about anything and everything. He had your true talker's instinctive faculty of discovering a good listener; and he had found one in George Pauncefort. Not your stupid listener, who gazes at you with the fixed stare of rapt admiration, and flounders dismally in the endeavour to reply to you, thereby too clearly revealing that he has not understood a word you have been saying; nor yet your self-absorbed listener, who abandons himself to his own reflections while you talk to him, and strikes in with a vacant grin and a "God bless my soul!" whenever you come to a full stop. Mr. Pauncefort was of the sterling metal,—the thoughtful listener, who weighs every word you say to him, and comes smashing against your pet theories with all the force of a vigorous intellect and the spirit of a born debater. Sir Jasper's face lighted up as the simple little dinner proceeded, for he fancied he had found the creature he had been long looking for: a companion—a man whose solitary habits resembled his own, and who could afford to fall into the ways of his host without going out of his own way to do it.

"We suit each other—or I venture to believe that we shall suit each other, Mr. Pauncefort," said Sir Jasper when the stately butler and his subordinate had departed, leaving a very unpretending dessert of big round pears and ruddy-checked peaches. "Marcia, I verily believe that I have discovered an acquaintance who will understand me, and whom I shall be able to understand. You may smile; but I assure you, my dear Sir, the experience of a very dreary exile has taught me how rare a creature is a congenial acquaintance. I won't say a *friend*, for the word has a tainted flavour to my taste. It seems such a thoroughly understood thing that your bosom friend is a man who falls in love with the woman you want to marry, wins all your money at *ecarté*, and shoots you through the lungs some chilly morning before sunrise in a swampy field on the Essex coast. Yes, a congenial acquaintance is the real *rara avis*, the impossible bird seldom found in any earthly nest. So long as I lived in the world, I was content to take my fellow-men for what they were worth. At the head of a long dinner-table it matters little to a man what his guests are worth *en détail*. He only wants them to be decent fellows *en gros*; and if they are but sufficiently noisy, if one ~~man~~ tells a little hunting story against the master of a rival pack and if

another man recites the last *canard* current in Belgravia, and there are none of those dismal pauses in which a kind of mental paralysis seems to mark every creature for its own,—he has no right to complain. But when a man washes his hands of the world and its follies, when he retires to his kennel, and yearns for an occasional visit from some kindred cynic, then comes the difficulty. He finds only dismal creatures, absorbed in the one delight of their lives—intellectual Paganinis, for ever performing on one string—artists who will talk of nothing but art—literary men who can talk of nothing but literature—political economists who are perambulating editions of Mill and M'Culloch—agriculturists who talk you to death about steam-farming and the utilisation of sewage; as if a man who has done with the world could possibly care what the world does with its sewage! There was only Diogenes; and until to-night I have never been able to meet an acquaintance whose tastes even in seeming bore any resemblance to my own."

It was a long time since Marcia Denison had seen her father so entirely expansive in his manner as he was to-night. Her dark-grey eyes brightened as she looked at him; and George Pauncefort, sitting opposite to her, and looking at her thoughtfully from time to time, saw that she was pleased with her father's pleasure. They went back to the study after dinner; and by-and-by Miss Denison made tea for her father and his guest. Sitting in a low luxurious chair by the great wood-fire, within a few paces of that feminine figure, the pale thoughtful face, the busy hands employed in the occupation which makes a woman seem more womanly and charming, it seemed to Sir Jasper's tenant as if the last twenty years of his life melted away, and he was a young man once more, with all a young man's freshness of spirit and happy confidence in the worth of lovely things.

Yes, all manner of fresh and gentle feelings came back upon this bruised and battered wanderer in African wildernesses. They came back,—the long-absent, the well-nigh forgotten spirits of peace and love,—and chased the dark and evil dwellers from the mansion they had so long usurped. The man's face seemed to soften; indeed it was a face which always softened when he smiled or spoke to women and children. His voice, at all times sonorous and musical, sank to a lower and sweeter music as he sat in Sir Jasper's study, talking grave speculative talk about the sites of perished empires, whose fantastic splendours have left no better record than a ruined temple or a few quaint hieroglyphics on a broken stone.

The great clock in the Scarsdale stables struck eleven as

George Pauncefort left the Abbey. He walked slowly home in the moonlight, thinking of his quiet evening with a sensation in which wonder was strangely intermingled with a vague fear.

"I had so firmly set my face to the darkness," he thought presently, "and I had learnt to endure its worst horrors,—is it wise to let in so much as an accidental ray of light?"

CHAPTER IV.

DOROTHY'S IMPRESSIONS.

EVEN your self-contained women cannot exist entirely without some natural outlet for all that is brightest and most womanly in her nature. Marcia Denison's accomplishments stood her in good stead, and went a great way towards a placid kind of happiness, a tranquil pleasure, undisturbed by any fear that it is too lovely a thing to endure. But however accomplished a woman may be, there are times when the mind grows weary, when the tired intellect recoils reluctantly from its accustomed labour, when the empty heart yearns for some pleasant thing to nestle in its dreary void. The human mind, however skilled in the scientific combination of sweet sounds, *cannot* be altogether satisfied with harmonious sequences, quaint fugues, contrary motions, and plaintive diminished sevenths. The human eye, however artistic, must have something more to look upon than the cool shadows and bright gleams of colour in a water-colour sketch. And a woman's soul, ever sympathetic, must have some nearer object for its warm sympathies than the dead-and-gone creatures whose stately phantoms stalk through the pages of history.

Marcia Denison, though she has some little right to rank herself among the dreaded lists of strong-minded women, was not entirely without a woman's fancies. She had her favourites amongst the people she had known from her earliest childhood, and the chief of them all was Dorothy.

Dorothy was the daughter of James Tursgood the bailiff, and by consequence the granddaughter of that elderly female who acted as Mr. Pauncefort's housekeeper. Dorothy had been a toddling baby of three when Marcia Denison was seven years old, and had been taken under the special direction of Sir Jasper's younger daughter at a very early age.

The child of seven had taken it into her wise head to patronise the rosy-cheeked toddler ; and from that time until Evelyn Denison's death and the Baronet's departure for the Continent, Dorothy Tursgood had been Marcia's pet and pupil. Of course, under these circumstances, Dorothy received an education which made her infinitely charming, and entirely unfit for the rough-and-ready style of existence in her father's household. She had felt this during Marcia's long absence from Scarsdale ; but it was all over now, for Dorothy was to be Miss Denison's own maid, and was to live entirely at the Abbey.

It was a pretty sight to see the two women grouped together in the autumn sunlight, in one of the deep window-seats of that chamber which had once been the school-room of Sir Jasper's two daughters, but which was now Marcia's own sitting-room, sacred from the footsteps of strangers.

Miss Denison sat on the cushioned window-seat, with the sunlight behind her head, while Dorothy crouched on a low stool at her feet, and looked lovingly and reverently upward to the thoughtful face of her mistress.

That pale face, with its sharply-defined and delicate features, was pleasantly contrasted by the rosy cheeks and sunny auburn hair that *would* break away into curls, confine it with whatever fetters you could choose, the arch hazel eyes, the ripe red lips, always ready to curve themselves into bewitching smiles, the saucy double-chin, the lurking dimple at each corner of the mouth, which formed the manifold charms of the bailiff's daughter. She was a round dumpling of prettiness and sweet temper, created to be the queen of a rustic May-day, the idol of bumpkin worshippers ; and the best of it was that she was quite unconscious of her own prettiness.

And yet she was by no means a high-minded woman. She was very fond of fine dress, and would lie awake all night thinking of a new bonnet, or a coloured print that she had seen in one of the grand emporiums of Roxborough. She was vain and frivolous, and would have very much liked to have been pretty ; but she had no idea that there could be any prettiness in a dumpling figure, round red cheeks, and an impertinent little nose, which was always pointing skywards, without any pretension to sublimity. Contemplating her own reflection in a looking-glass, poor Dorothy sighed as she thought how nice it would have been to be tall and slender, like Miss Denison, with a proud pale face, and dark arched brows above deeply-clear grey eyes. Dorothy worshipped her patroness and mistress, and founded all her ideas of perfection upon this one model of womanhood. To wear

corded black silk, thick and lustreless as the rector's gown, a narrow linen collar clasped tightly round a slim swan-like throat; to have long thin white hands, all aglitter with diamond rings, and to sit all day in beautiful rooms, seemed to Dorothy Tursgood the very perfection of human happiness, whose even course could only be disturbed by sudden death.

Dorothy, with these ideas deeply rooted in her mind, contemplated her mistress with some feeling of wonder; for Marcia Denison accepted the delights of her life with a manner that was a great deal more like calm resignation than complete happiness. Could it be possible that such possessions as diamond-rings and unlimited silk-dresses might become flat and indifferent by long familiarity? Oh, if it was so, what a barren universe this world must be! and out of *what* material could the youthful mind shape its ideal of perfect bliss? Dorothy's heart had been unmoved by so much as one flutter engendered of love's restless fever, and as yet her tranquil slumbers were only disturbed by the vision of a new bonnet-ribbon, or a coral necklace purchased at Roxborough fair.

It was the third day after Miss Denison's return,—the day succeeding that quiet little dinner at which George Pauncefort had found himself an almost involuntary guest,—and Dorothy Tursgood was enjoying what she called a "lovely long talk" with her mistress. It happened somehow that Mr Pauncefort formed the principal subject of discussion in this lovely long talk; and as the talk was almost absorbed by the vivacious Dorothy, this fact was by no means singular. Marcia, returned from Continental wanderings, might have a great deal to tell her enthusiastic little attendant; but Dorothy, who had spent all her life at Scarsdale, must necessarily be rather restricted in her choice of topics.

"And, oh, Miss Marcia, I am sure that he is very poor," she said presently, at the end of a long disquisition upon the habits and manners of Sir Jasper's tenant.

"But why, my pet?" asked Miss Denison, with a smile.

She was in a lazy humour this morning, and had thrown aside a musical composition in which consecutive fifths *would* crop up in the bass in spite of her. She had thrown aside her sheet of music-paper and shut the piano, and now she felt a drowsy pleasure in the balmy air, the mellow sunlight, and the gentle hum of pretty Dorothy's voice.

"Why do you think he is poor, my darling?"

Dorothy gave a little gasp. She had the feminine habit of jumping at conclusions, and the equally feminine habit of not being very clear as to why she had so jumped.

"Well," she murmured thoughtfully, "first and foremost because he wears, oh, *such* a shabby coat!"

"He may wear that from choice, my Dorothy. An old garment is sometimes so comfortable to a lazy man,—and yet I should hardly think Mr. Pauncefort was lazy. Or his shabby costume may be an affectation of eccentricity,—and yet, from what I saw of him last night, I should scarcely imagine he would be guilty of affectation. However, my dear little Dorothy, there may be a dozen reasons why he should wear a worn-out shooting-coat, and not one of them need be the want of money."

"Oh, but then I think he is poor because of so many things. It isn't only the coat. There is one reason why I think he is very, very, very poor!" said Dorothy, shaking her head, and screwing up her lips with extraordinary solemnity.

"And what is that reason, dear?"

"He never gives anything to poor people. Never, never! And yet I am sure he is charitable, for he will go and see poor people, and sit with them, and listen to all their troubles, and ask, oh, such lots of questions, until they begin to think he's going to do ever so much for them, and then he goes away and does nothing. Now, of course that would be very unkind if he were rich. I haven't forgotten my grammar, Miss Marcia,—subjunctive mood, if he were. So I feel sure he must be dreadfully poor. I mean dreadful, because it *is* dreadful for rich people to be poor."

"Dorothy!"

"I mean it's dreadful for people that ought to be rich to be poor. Do you know, Miss Marcia, I think sometimes the gentleman at the Hermitage is—what's that where we always put the *th* in the wrong place?"

"Misanthropic."

"Yes, that's it—mis-an-thropic," cried Dorothy, with a triumphant snap at the last two syllables; "and oh, what a pity they can't invent some shorter word to mean grumpy, without being vulgar! I think he *is* misanthropic, Miss, because he'll shut himself up with his books for days together, grandmother says; and in all the time he's been at the Hermitage he hasn't made a single acquaintance in Roxborough; and somehow, do you know, Miss Marcia, I think he must have turned grump—misan-thingamy—from not being happy in his mind; for oh, he does give such a sigh sometimes as he sits over his books!"

"Why, Dorothy, you are a Fouché in petticoats."

"I remember all about him, Miss Marica. Joseph Fouché, minister of police under Napoleon Bonaparte, born at La Martinière, near Nantes, 1763; created Duke of Otranto 1809;

died 1820," said Dorothy, folding her hands meekly, with a lively recollection of her lessons. "Do you know, Miss Marcia, when I'm in chapel on a Sunday, I sometimes wonder whether I look different from the other girls,—whether I look as if I knew history and grammar and geography, and such like? but lor', Miss, I do think a bonnet-ribbon makes more difference than all the education that ever was," Dorothy murmured with a thoughtful sigh.

Miss Denison caressed the pretty auburn curls with her slim white fingers, and considered whether she had been very wise in cramming that simple head with a second edition of all the hard facts that had been filtered through her own brain.

"I'm afraid your education may not be much use to you in what people call a practical way, my darling," she said presently; "but education must always have a refining influence, and refinement is a kind of goodness. Besides, who knows what my Dorothy's fate may be in after life? There may come a day when it will be very useful to you to speak tolerably good English, and write a nice legible hand. And as for Pinnock's *Goldsmith* and Mangnall's *Questions*, this world must always have some pleasanter associations for those who know all about the dead-and-gone people who have inhabited it. In the mean while you and I can be companions now and then, Dorothy; which we could scarcely be, if you were exactly like the other girls you sit with at chapel."

"Oh no, indeed, Miss Marcia, they are so dreadful, and drop their *h*'s always; and their hands are so red, and their boots are so clumpy; and they do breathe so hard, that it's quite unpleasant to sit next them. But oh, Miss, I'm not good enough to be your companion ever; only you're so kind to me."

"Am I, Dorothy? I'm afraid my kindness is not without some alloy of selfishness, and may be, after all, rather ill-advised kindness."

"Selfish, dear Miss Marcia! You, who are so good to every one, and so kind to me; for, oh, it is so kind of you not to want me to wear caps!" cried Dorothy, shaking her bright auburn hair into all manner of crispy undulations and stray tendrils that were infinitely bewitching. "But what was I saying just now, Miss Marcia?" resumed the bailiff's daughter; "Oh, about his being so gloomy."

"About whom, darling?" asked Miss Denison in a dreamy voice.

She had been thinking of her dead sister. It was only natural that this return to the Abbey should bring the lost girl's image very vividly before her. The place was so dull

so utterly empty and dreary without that dashing and impulsive Evelyn, who had been wont to burst into Marcia's sitting-room half-a-dozen times in the course of a morning—a beautiful, spontaneous, vivacious creature, whose presence filled the dulllest room with life and brightness.

"And I'm sure she loved me a little," Marcia thought very sadly; "and now there is no one—no one."

There was little Dorothy looking up at her mistress's pensive face all the time; but though Dorothy's affection was a very pleasant thing, it was not exactly the thing to fill the great void in such a heart as Marcia Denison's; it was a little too much like the grateful chirping of a bird who flutters his wings and perches lovingly on a finger of the hand that tends him; or the frisking of a petted lap-dog, nestling at the feet of his mistress. This return to Scarsdale seemed to Marcia Denison like the reopening of a wound that time had almost healed; and her thoughts wandered far away from the subject of Dorothy Tursgood's simple prattle, which was all about that one solitary event of the last twelvemonth—the advent of George Pauncefort to the Hermitage.

"And, as I said before, Miss Marcia," Dorothy rattled on, in a breathless way peculiar to the genus vulgarly known as chatterbox, "I'm sure he's very poor, dreadfully poor, and I sometimes think it's that which makes him unhappy. Because, you see, he's so clever; he *must* be very, very clever, you know; always reading, reading, reading, as he is all day, and all night too sometimes; and it does seem hard for such a clever person to be cut off from the rest of the world, and to live in the middle of a wood and see nobody, on account of his poverty."

"But you said just now that he was misanthropic, Dorothy," said Miss Denison, arousing herself by an effort from that long reverie about the dead; "misanthropic people think it no misfortune to be cut off from the rest of the world."

"Don't they, Miss? I fancied people were misanthropists only when they couldn't afford to be anything else. It *must* be so much cheaper to despise the human race than to wear nice clothes and give dinner-parties."

"But there is such a thing as an honest love of solitude, Dorothy, and a natural distaste for the clamour and contention of the world. Do you remember that French proverb I taught you, *Le jeu ne vaut pas la chandelle*? People generally say that when they have burnt out the candle and lost the game; but I suppose there are a few exceptionally wise people who keep their candle, and turn their backs upon the gaming-table. Mr Pauncefort may be one of those people."

"I don't think that, Miss," answered Dorothy, with a wise

shake of her curly head ; " *I* think he is a person who has had a great fortune and spent it ; and, though he carries his head very high, and seems to take his troubles in an offhand kind of way, he can't help sighing sometimes when he remembers how rich he once was. That's what *I* think, Miss, and that's what grandmother thinks. She has tried to get the truth out of Mr. Pauncefort's servant ; but she says you might as well question a tombstone as him, or better, for that *would* tell you *something*, even if it wasn't true."

And here George Pauncefort's name drifted out of Dorothy's chatter, and the girl's talk rambled on into other channels ; Miss Denison's hand lying tenderly on the pretty head which rested on her knee, while Miss Denison's mind wandered far away into the vanished regions of the past. Every now and then she brought herself back for a moment from that shadowy world to say something kind to her enthusiastic little maid ; and even when her thoughts were furthest away, that ruder second sense—that superficial intellect which will serve us for common use, while the soul soars upward into cloudland—took cognisance of all that Dorothy was saying.

Thus it was that Marcia Denison received her first impressions about George Pauncefort. Dorothy's estimate of that gentleman's worldly circumstances was accepted by her mistress—chiefly perhaps because the subject was too indifferent to be worth any serious discussion—and, once carelessly accepted, became a rooted conviction.

When Mr. Pauncefort paid his second visit to the Abbey, he had exchanged his velveteen shooting-jacket for a frock-coat ; but the cloth was tolerably well worn, and the cut of the coat fixed the date of its confection at some years before the stranger's advent at Scarsdale. The coat might have looked *outré* and old-fashioned upon a meaner-looking man, but Sir Jasper's tenant had that indefinable something, that utterly indescribable air of distinction, which makes a man independent of his tailor. What an unspeakable distance between gentleman Brummel, created by the happy inspiration of sartorial genius, and the quiet English gentleman of the blue blood, whose hearty grace is a heritage bequeathed to him by Crusaders who fought at Acre, and Knights who saw the earth black with the slaughtered chivalry of France on Crecy's fatal field !

Sir Jasper Denison, not easily pleased upon ordinary occasions, had been pleased to take very kindly to the solitary occupant of the Hermitage, and was inclined to go into raptures about his new acquaintance. The Baronet was very impulsive, and not a little frivolous. The bitter stroke which Fate had dealt at him had fallen on a nature too weak and

selfish to be elevated or sublimated by affliction. He was a man who took the decrees of Heaven in pretty much the same spirit as that in which he might have taken the undeserved cruelty of an earthly assailant. When his daughter died, he could not bow his head and resign himself to the belief that she had only floated away from him into a fairer region, whither he might some day follow her, if he so pleased. He was a student of those brilliant philosophers whose genius illumined with flashes of lurid grandeur the eve of the French revolution. He could not make a temple of worship out of the tomb of his dead child. The sepulchre of the beloved was a horrible thing from which he fled away to beguile his grief by a cynical contemplation of frivolous humanity amusing itself at German watering-places, or hurrying through Italian picture-galleries. It may be that Sir Jasper's sudden predilection for the society of George Pouncefort arose chiefly from the fact that the stranger was the only person at Searsdale whose presence did not remind him of the dead. With the tenant of the Hermitage the bereaved father felt himself safe; no chance allusion to the lost, no half-retracted mention of *her* name, was likely to drop from the lips of the man who had never seen her. It is difficult for any human creature linked to an eternal future by the feeblest shred of Christian faith, to understand the unutterable horror which Death wears when he crosses the threshold of the Atheist. To Sir Jasper Denison consolation was an impossibility. The only anodyne by which his grief might at intervals be lulled to rest was occupation. He had amused himself somehow or other by those restless and fitful Continental wanderings, until he had used up all those regions where the Sybarite may travel without finding too many crumpled leaves among the roses, and he came back now with the vague intention of occupying himself by some desultory dabbling in building, philanthropy, and steam-farming.

In this humour the Baronet was rather pleased to hear of the fallen chimney at the Hermitage. He sent a messenger post-haste to summon the Roxborough architect on the morning after Mr. Pouncefort's visit to the Abbey; and after a very long consultation with that gentleman—to which solemn conference Sir Jasper's tenant was specially invited—certain improvements were arranged which would in no way destroy the picturesque mediævalism of the Hermitage, but which were sufficiently important to render that tenement unfit for occupation during the space of some weeks.

"In which period you will do me the honour by taking up your quarters here," said Sir Jasper; "I intend making myself as familiar with the Niger as I am with the Thames; and I

shall look to you, Mr. Pauncefort, to give me the delightful sensation of playing hide-and-seek with a family party of lions every evening."

"You are very good, Sir Jasper; I was thinking of making a little pedestrian tour——"

"And depriving me of my African explorations! But a pedestrian tour in October! Wet days and foggy evenings, rheumatism and sciatica! Have you looked at your glass this morning? No, I'm sure you have not. I am an idle man, Mr. Pauncefort, and, like all idle men, learned in the signs of the times. We are going to have abominable weather for a month to come. Look at that low grey sky; and then decline the shelter of my blue bed-room in favour of the slippery moors and damp woodlands, if you dare."

Sir Jasper's tenant hesitated, looked out of the window and then looked back into the room. It was past five in the afternoon, and the day was darkening already. The dull grey sky and shadowy landscape without contrasted dismally with the warm glow of the firelight within. There is such a wondrous magic in the red light of a fire. Surely it must be the magic of association—dating from the far-away day when month old babies lie upon their mothers' knees and laugh for the first time to see the ruddy flames dancing up the chimney. George Pauncefort looked back into the room, and in that one moment of hesitation his resolutions spread its wings and floated away into chaos. The conference had been held in the library, the chamber in which George Pauncefort had watched Marcia Denison's white hands hovering over the teacups the night before. The firelight glimmering on the morocco bindings of books that lined the wainscot from the ceiling to the floor made the room radiant with the tender glory of home, and even the grim bronze sea-god seemed to melt under that pleasant influence and modulate his monotonous voice to a gentler tone.

Some invisible spirit, permeating the very atmosphere with its subtle presence, seemed to whisper,

"This is home—home—the mystic region which you have not inhabited for fifteen years. Welcome, poor wanderer from the desert; welcome lost bird from a ruined nest; welcome, from your lonely tent under the cold unpitying sky, poor friendless creature; welcome—home—home!"

And then another spirit of an argumentative and rebellious order arose in the man's breast, and cried,

"What have you done that you should turn away from this pleasant shelter to tramp the country side, with houseless vagabonds for your fellow-travellers? Are you a pariah, that you must shrink away from friendly hands, and go

and hide yourself among village boors and wandering outcasts?"

There was a brief pause, during which Sir Jasper amused himself by stirring the logs piled on the coal-fire, and then George Pouncefort replied:

"I will accept your invitation, Sir Jasper, as frankly as it is given. There is no reason why I should decline your hospitality, or recoil from your kindness." He said this with some touch of pride in his manner, and a faint glow upon his dark face.

"Good!" exclaimed the Baronet, laying his hand upon the bell. "Then I may tell Mrs. Browning to air the blue room. You will come to us to-morrow, and the builders may begin their work as soon afterwards as they please. You will bring your servant, by-the-bye. Imagine Diogenes with a body-servant! Remember that you are exchanging one Hermitage for another. No dinner-parties; no pretty girls; no empty-headed young men to play billiards in the rainy mornings. Only a big rambling house, tolerably well filled with objects of art, and a fretful old man and his daughter. Do you think you can make yourself happy with us?"

"I am only afraid of being too happy."

"How do you mean?"

A deep flush kindled in George Pouncefort's face as the Baronet asked this question. For a moment he seemed just a little confused, and scarcely able to answer that simple inquiry, but in the next minute he replied very quietly:

"Do you remember what Dante and Tennyson have said about 'a sorrow's crown of sorrow?' There are circumstances in the history of my life which make it impossible that I should ever have a home. Do you suppose Diogenes was free to choose anything better when he took to his tub? I cannot imagine the cynical mood innate in man. To my mind it seems only the reactionary phase of sorrow. I have been very comfortable yonder with the ghost of the fair-haired cavalier, who has not yet been pleased to reveal himself in any palpable shape. Will it be wise to exchange my loneliness for genial companionship, and the atmosphere of a home, since there must be the going back afterwards?"

Sir Jasper shrugged his shoulders.

"You'll be tired of us before the builders have finished their work, and will be very glad to return to your solitude. Men were created to bore one another. *if* you are *not* tired, you will be free to come back to us whenever you please. You will not be disturbed here by the sight of any unapproachable domestic happiness; you will be the guest of a lonely old man, who has been robbed of all that made life bright for him, and

who does his best to take existence in the frivolous spirit of a *persifleur*, because he has for ever lost all chance of any deeper delight than the temporary enjoyment to be derived from the aroma of a choice wine, or the pleasant talk of an intellectual acquaintance. Do you remember what Voltaire says, Mr. Pauncefort: 'Life is a child, which must be rocked in a cradle till it falls asleep.' You and I have both had our troubles; why shouldn't we help each other to rock the cradle?"

Of course this discussion ended in George Pauncefort's acceptance of his landlord's invitation. He went back to the *Hermitage* pondering the matter in much the same moody spirit that he had pondered the night before, as he walked homeward under the stars.

Was it wise?

"Bah! What harm can come of it?" thought Mr. Pauncefort, impatiently; "have I grown a dotard, that I weigh so small a business as solemnly as if it were the turning point of my destiny? What can it matter whether I go or stay? And yet after fifteen years' voluntary exile from civilised companionship, it seems almost like the violation of a vow. Shall I pack up my goods and go back yonder? Shall I start for Tripoli to-morrow, instead of taking up my quarters at the Abbey? No; I have come home to make my grave in England; and so long as this man preserves his solitary habits, I could have no safer shelter than Scarsdale wood."

So having let his mind slip away from a certain settled resolution which had regulated his actions for fifteen years, Mr. Pauncefort became all at once the most undecided of mankind. Throughout the evening after this interview with Sir Jasper, he seemed the prey to a perpetual restlessness of spirit, not even to be lulled into peace by man's great consoler—the pipe. He paced up and down his room, took half-a-dozen volumes from their shelves, only to stare at their pages in abstracted mood and then to fling them impatiently aside: he put down his meerschaum, with its contents only half consumed: and it was not until after eleven o'clock that he rang for his servant, and told him to prepare for the visit to Scarsdale.

The necessary preparations could involve very little trouble, as Mr. Pauncefort's wardrobe—except in the manner of linen—was of the most limited order. Sir Jasper's tenant seemed a great deal more at ease after he had given these decisive orders to his servant. He seated himself in the ponderous old-fashioned arm-chair by the low woodfire—the murdered cavalier may have sat in that chair, perhaps—and refilled his meerschaum. Then as he watched the blue clouds of smoke floating upward and melting slowly away, he let his mind wander

freely whithersoever it would. He thought of Sir Jasper, with all the better attributes of his nature buried in the grave of the dead : and of Sir Jasper's pensive daughter, doomed never to know a father's love, bearing her burden of sorrow with a quiet resignation which was more beautiful than the gaiety of happier women.

"The housekeeper was quite right," thought George Pauncefort ; "Sir Jasper is not unkind to his daughter : he only overlooks her."



CHAPTER V.

"AT FIRST HER IMAGE WAS A DREAMY THING."

MARCIA DENISON was pleased to find that her father had at last lighted on an acquaintance whose companionship seemed to afford him unalloyed satisfaction. During the Baronet's absence from Scarsdale his daughter had not found her position by any means a sinecure. Ambitious Madame de Maintenon found it a hard thing to amuse the unamusable. The burden of her father's *ennui* had fallen more heavily on Marcia than on the sufferer himself. When an invalid is of the discontented and fretful temperament, that invalid's nurse has a bad time of it. For five years Marcia Denison had borne the weary load of her father's sorrows, and had received only courteous little speeches and polite smiles in payment of her devotion. If he could have taken her to his heart, what a tender and loving creature would have nestled there ! But he could not do this. His daughter Evelyn had been the beautiful embodiment of his first love. For his daughter Marcia he could only feel the same cold toleration which he had felt for his second wife.

The girl knew this. She knew that her mother's heart had withered for lack of the warm sunshine of love. She knew this, and it was only the wise tolerance which generally belongs to a noble intellect that enabled her to forgive the man who had crushed her mother's gentle spirit. Happily she could forgive, for she could understand and pity.

"It was all a mistake," she thought,—“an unhappy mistake. My father gave a grand old name in exchange for a trader's fortune, and fancied that polite speeches and set smiles would make a very tolerable substitute for love.”

Marcia possessed, among her few treasures, a small packet

of letters, addressed by her father to her mother before their marriage. These should have been love-letters, for they had been written during the period in which Alicia Jones had been betrothed to Sir Jasper Denison ; but the cold and stately tone of the epistles was unrelieved by one gush of real feeling. They were very gentlemanly letters, such as a Sir Charles Grandison might have composed ; but they were the letters of a man whose heart had never beat with one throb of affection for the woman to whom they were addressed.

In these coldly-worded letters Marcia Denison saw her father's justification. At the least, he had not deceived that dead mother, whose pale face looked out at her from an old-fashioned miniature. Marcia forgave her father, but she could not forget her mother's sorrow, and she resigned herself to the idea that she was to descend unloved and but little lamented to the grave. The first germ of this idea had been planted in her mind long ago in her earliest childhood, when she had seen so many evidences of a love that was given to her sister, and withheld from her. But now the vague fancy had grown into a deeply-rooted conviction, not easily to be plucked out of her breast. She fancied that no one would ever love her. She had no special ground for this belief, for she had been considerably admired whenever she had appeared in society, and she had received more than one eligible offer of marriage. But she was an heiress,—the actual possessor of a very large fortune, inherited from her plebeian mother, and having the prospect of a second fortune from her father. She therefore took it for granted that her wooers were actuated by purely mercenary considerations, and dismissed them with freezing coldness. They only insulted her by a pretence of love which they could not feel, and she was wounded and made angry by their affected preference.

Remember that her claim to be considered a strong-minded woman was based only on her studious habits, her superior education. In actual experience of the world she was no better skilled than a school-girl. Before her sister's death she had been too young to appear very often in society ; and since that melancholy event she had seen only the few people whom from time to time her father had "taken up," generally to let them drop again with ill-concealed disgust and disappointment.

And now he had been pleased to take up the tenant at the Hermitage ; and but for a dread of some sudden and scarcely polite revulsion of feeling, poor Marcia would have been entirely pleased that her father should have a new acquaintance likely to beguile him in those long dreary winter evenings rapidly approaching. Miss Denison felt more hopeful of

this new friendship than of many which her father had chosen to make during his Continental travels, for she saw that Mr. Pauncefort was a gentleman, and many of her father's acquaintance had not been quite gentlemen,—only that excellent electro-plated imitation of the real article which looks so brilliant, until the edges begin to be worn away by familiar use. No one could possibly have mistaken Mr. Pauncefort for anything but a gentleman. No certificate of character was needed before you admitted him into your house; poor and out-at-elbows perhaps; ruined by extravagant habits, it might be; for these things may happen to a gentleman of the blood-royal; but branded by no dishonour, degraded by no low vices, debased by no meanness of thought or deed.

Marcia accepted her father's guest as frankly as if she had known him from her childhood. His grave demeanour, his probable poverty, recommended him to her. Her pensive spirit would have shrunk from a brilliant favourite of fortune, but it advanced to greet this toil-worn wayfarer with kindness and pity.

Ah, then indeed George Pauncefort felt what it was to breathe the atmosphere of home after long years of banishment; home, created by the presence of a good and pure-minded woman. Shall I describe how a quiet sympathy, a tacit friendship, first arose between this man and Marcia Denison? It is so difficult to describe the beginning of friendship. No doubt it dated from the first happy coincidence of thought or fancy, in which two minds unite in sudden harmony, like notes struck at random on an instrument, that yet compose a perfect chord.

Amongst all the chance acquaintance whom it had pleased Sir Jasper to patronise, this bronzed African traveller was the only creature in whose society Marcia had been able to take any pleasure. And then she pitied him because he was poor, and friendless, and lonely; she trusted him implicitly, inspired by an instinctive confidence in the nobility of his nature. He was very much her senior, highly educated, refined, poetical; and all the chivalrous sentiments of this daughter of Joneses and traders were aroused by the contemplation of his loneliness and ruin. She had quite accepted Dorothy Tursgood's theory about this solitary stranger. He had been rich, and had squandered or lost a great fortune. His friends,—bah! they were gone with the friends of Timon; vanished like all followers of the general who is beaten in the great battle of life. He was very poor, and had come to Scarsdale wood to hide himself and his fallen fortunes from the world which had smiled on his prosperity. It was a very plausible theory; and any chance word that George Pauncefort did let drop

upon his own affairs tended to its confirmation. If he talked of pictures, he talked like a man who had possessed such things and had lost them. He brought Marcia some books one day from the Hermitage, and the volumes looked somehow like *jetsam* and *flotsam* from the wreck of a splendid library. The coat he wore was almost threadbare, but even Marcia's inexperienced eye could recognise the genius of a crack West-end tailor in the harmonious outlines of the shabby garment. The old-fashioned watch which he carried at the end of a plain black ribbon was an exquisite toy of gold and enamel, which had belonged to Louis the Sixteenth, and looked like the last cherished remnant of a collector's treasures.

He was standing in the mullioned window at the end of the corridor one morning with Marcia Denison, looking into the old-fashioned garden which she called her own. He was standing where he had stood to hear the history of Sir Jasper's two daughters from the lips of the garrulous old housekeeper.

For some minutes he had been standing in the same attitude, looking at the old garden with a fixed dreamy gaze. He had been a guest at the Abbey for nearly three weeks, and a pleasant friendliness had arisen already between him and Marcia. She was sitting at the little table, moving the ivory chessmen stealthily to and fro upon the board, and looking up with a half-smile at his dreamy face.

"You know some other garden like this, Mr. Pauncefort?" she said presently.

He started, and looked at her fixedly with something like alarm in his glance.

"How do you know that, Miss Denison?"

"I could see it in your face. Do you think I could live so long almost alone with papa, and not learn to read people's faces? I can read his thoughts—I sometimes wish I couldn't—even when they lie deepest; and yours were very easy to read just now. You would never have looked so tenderly at my garden if there had not been the memory of some other garden in your mind."

"Yes, you are right. I fancied myself thirty years younger than I am; and I was a little boy feeding ducks in a pond something like that one yonder under the shadow of the old wall. I almost felt my mother's hand in mine—I almost heard the rustling of her dress as the autumn wind swept by us just now, and stirred those fallen leaves. Yes, I was thinking of another garden far away in the heart of Yorkshire. I dare say the weeds are growing thickly enough there now."

He sighed like a man who remembers and regrets a lost heritage: then turning away from the window suddenly, he said,

"Miss Denison, I never told a lie in my life, and yet I have not the courage to show myself in the place where I was born."

"Ah," thought Marcia, "Dorothy was right. He must be very poor, for poverty is the only sin which a man can bear nobly, knowing all the while that he can never be forgiven by the world."

And then the grey eyes, marvellously soft when pity glanced from their clear depths, were gently raised to the traveller's bronzed face. Poor ruined wanderer! Miss Denison began to think of some plan for his future comfort. Her father had influence: might not that influence be exerted in favour of this friendless stranger? Some small appointment; some foreign mission; some civilian's position in India,—so many men with blighted fortunes had been known to flourish anew under the shadow of the Himalayas. The woman whose pity is unmixed with any practical spirit is no true woman. To pity a person was, with Marcia, to help them.

Mr. Pouncefort seated himself before the chess-table. He was by no means apt to make a parade of any gloomy secrets that might lie hidden in his breast; but when a man carries a fox under his waistcoat a stray paw of the animal *will* now and then peep out from its hiding-place.

"Shall we play, Miss Denison?" asked Sir Jasper's tenant, laying his hand upon the ivory pieces.

"If you please."

They were both good players: but to-day Marcia's tactics were of the most erratic order. Her knights dropped unresistingly into the hungry jaws of her opponent's bishops: her poor little pawns were swept off the board by swooping castles: and even her queen fell a victim to the stealthy side-long advances of a knight.

"Check-mate; and a doubtful victory, Miss Denison," cried George Pouncefort. "Your thoughts have been far away from the pieces under your hand. I am afraid the game has bored you."

Miss Denison blushed. Her father's guest was offended: and yet she had been weaving little schemes for his advancement all the time. That Indian appointment: if it could only be procured, this man might achieve a new opening in life, new prospects, new hopes, almost a renewal of youth. And while Marcia was scheming for his benefit, the ungrateful creature was angry with her for being inattentive to a game at chess. Some women would have been indignant at Mr.

Pauncefort's offended tone ; but not Marcia Denison. She was quite a woman, in the highest and purest sense of the word ; no frivolous girl, greedy of admiration, eager for conquest : but a woman, long-suffering, tender, unselfish, with the simple candour of a child, the patient heroism of a martyr.

Mr. Pauncefort had been nearly three weeks an inmate of Scarsdale Abbey, and in that time he and Marcia had been very much together ; in spite of those feminine employments which kept the young lady in her own apartment for several hours during the day. That quiet house was the very place of all others for the growth of friendliness and intimacy between two people who were inclined to like each other. And these two people were peculiarly disposed to be friendly, for the gentle spirit of compassion had taken up her abode in the breast of each. George Pauncefort cherished the memory of that simple family history related to him by the old house-keeper—that story of a sorrowful childhood, a poor little motherless girl forgotten and neglected. He remembered this, and it was by the light of this knowledge that he regarded Marcia Denison when first he became acquainted with her. He did not recognise the heiress of Scarsdale in that stately young lady with the pale still face : he only saw the luckless little girl who had never been so happy as to win a father's love,—the neglected daughter whose lonely childhood had developed into a lonelier womanhood.

From a happy, frivolous-minded girl, radiant with the consciousness of her own fascinations, eager to assert and establish the royalty of her beauty, Sir Jasper's tenant would have shrunk away terror-stricken ; but in pale Marcia's quiet presence he felt a sense of peace and security that wrapped him round like the balmy breath of southern breezes on a sunless autumn day. They pitied each other, and involuntarily their voices took a softer music when they talked together. She was so sorry for his poverty and friendlessness : he was so sorry for her loveless childhood, and joyless, wasted youth.

And in the mean while capricious Sir Jasper seemed to have become suddenly constant. Mr. Pauncefort had been three weeks at the Abbey, and as yet there were no chilling tokens of disenchantment. Every morning at nine there was the same cosy little breakfast in the oak-panelled dining-room ; every evening at seven the same comfortable little dinner and delicate Rhenish wines. And then between breakfast and dinner there were chance meetings in the corridor or on the terrace ; and then after dinner there was the long quiet evening—the delicious home-like evening, with endless

talk and strong tea, brewed in a *chef-d'œuvre* in the way of tea-pots, and poured into Dresden tea-cups by a woman's graceful hands.

Is it wise, George Pauncefort,—is it wise to linger and be happy, when there must be, sooner or later, the going back? He had excuses for lingering. Surely never, in a commercial and business-like point of view, were workmen so slow as those masons and carpenters and bricklayers who were intrusted with the restoration of the Hermitage. And on the other hand, looking at the edifice with the eyes of Sir Jasper's visitor, surely no fairy palace ever hurried more swiftly towards completion than the quaint old building in the wood.

"Already!" That mystic word which the pensive voyager who journeys with Sir Edward Lytton's boatman has need to repeat so often, sounded like a death-knell in the ears of George Pauncefort. He had stayed five weeks at the Abbey, and the workmen had been busy a week beyond the time appointed for their task; and now he had nothing to do but to render polite thanks for the Baronet's hospitality, and then go back to his old quarters.

His old quarters! Would they ever seem as they had seemed to him? Would there ever be the dull quiet, the same grey, joyless calm, which was at least peace? The perfect comfort to be had out of a book and a pipe; the contentment which arises in the mind that has fully resigned itself to abjure all hope of happiness,—should he ever know these again? Ah, fool! he could scarcely close his eyes now without seeing a woman's figure, a delicate face bending over a tea-table, the drooping curve of a slender throat, the fitful shimmer of a silken dress in a firelit chamber. And it was late in November now, and the nights would be so long. Ah, weary wayfarer, if the angels who guard the gates of Paradise should lower their flaming swords, and ask you to step in and rest, beware of their kindness, reject their offered bounty; for after the joy of the garden comes the anguish of *going back*; and the dusty highway will seem a thousand-fold more barren by contrast with that glimpse of the lost Eden.

Some such thoughts as these may have been in George Pauncefort's mind upon the last evening of his stay at the Abbey, for he was very silent. He had been wont to talk a great deal, and to talk well during these peaceful evenings, so untrammelled by ceremonious restraints, so secure from the intrusion of any incongruous element from the outer world. Travellers snow-bound within the hospitable walls of an Alpine monastery could scarcely have been more entirely alone than these three people were in the big library at Scarsdale. Even Sir Jasper, who prided himself on a serene indifference to the

coming and going of those acquaintance whom he took it into his head to admire and patronise—even Sir Jasper's sallow face wore an expression of genuine regret as he spoke of his guest's departure.

"To-morrow morning! and you say you must go? You want to fall back into your old habits—study, and so on. Well, Mr. Pauncefort, I have no right to put in any selfish pleas against what seems a very settled determination. If you must go, you must; and I must resign myself to turn my back upon Africa, and forego my after-dinner hand at *ecarté*. Marcia has been good enough to learn the game; but no woman ever played *ecarté*; their only notion of the game is, that the king must be somewhere in the pack, and that if they only go on proposing long enough, they're sure to get him. I shall miss you very much, Mr. Pauncefort; we disagreed so delightfully about Bolingbroke and Voltaire. There is nothing so agreeable as the society of a man whose opinions are totally opposed to one's own. I shall miss you most—confoundedly!" exclaimed Sir Jasper, almost testily. "I wish I were some despotic Oriental potentate, with the power of submitting to you the option of remaining my guest, or going out into the courtyard to be bowstrung; but our western civilisation is against that sort of thing, and I can only ask you to come and dine with us as often as you can."

"I shall be very glad to come back again. You cannot suppose that I am churl enough to undervalue the delight of congenial society; but I have already told you, Sir Jasper, there are circumstances in my life which preclude my ever having a home of my own; and I am afraid of growing too dependent on pleasant companionship. I have spent twelve months very comfortably with no comrades but my pipe and my book, and I want to go back to my Hermitage before Sybarite habits have been engendered by your hospitality."

Sir Jasper's tenant had laid some little stress upon the words, "There are circumstances in my life which preclude my ever having a home of my own;" and he had stolen one little look at Marcia as he spoke them.

Miss Denison's face was turned towards him with an undisguised expression of infinite compassion. He thought the clear grey eyes, so wondrously serene, so calm in their tender thoughtfulness, might have shone out of the face of a pitying angel pensively contemplative of earthly sorrow.

And then Sir Jasper's tenant seemed to put aside whatever sad thoughts had kept him silent that evening, and talked as it was his habit to talk, with a quiet earnestness that sometimes almost warmed into enthusiasm. He was nearly forty years of age, and was therefore unafflicted with that terrible

incapacity for any emotion which seems common to the youth of this generation. To him life seemed a battle-field in which it was a noble thing to be victor : and if he had retired to hide himself in his tent, it was that he had fought the fight and had been beaten, and not because he considered the battle a pitiful fray, scarcely worth the winning. To-night he talked more eloquently than was his wont ; and Sir Jasper, who was nothing if not a *persifleur*, was fain to let the conversation lapse almost into a duologue between his daughter and his guest, for it soared into regions which he could only enter when carried aloft by stronger pinions than his own. Ah, how short the hours seemed to George Pauncefort that night ; and what a grim tyrant that bronze sea-king, scowling grimly above the dial on which the minute-hand revolved so swiftly ! It was after midnight, when a politely smothered yawn from Sir Jasper gave the first hint at anything like weariness in that narrow circle, and recalled Mr. Pauncefort from those far-away realms of thought in which it had been so pleasant to roam with gentle, womanly Marcia Denison. Perhaps that was her highest charm. She was a woman!—not a deliciously gushing creature, whose lovely eyes would fix themselves upon you in tender compassion for your sad cough one minute, and who in the next would bounce out of the room and expose you to the horrors of an east wind by leaving a door open. She was a woman—a ministering angel in the hour of affliction, and not “uncertain” or “hard to please” at any time ; nor yet conscious of any divine right to be pleased at the cost of other people’s pleasure. George Pauncefort gave one regretful look round the room, as he said good-night.

“I think I will say good-night and good-bye too,” he said. “I have planned one of my pedestrian excursions for the next few days, and shall take my departure at daybreak to-morrow.”

“But we shall see you soon again ?”

“I hope so. I—if you are good enough to wish it, I shall be very glad to come back—now and then.”

“Good enough to wish it !” cried Sir Jasper testily. “When I have found the *rara avis* I have been hunting for the last five years—a congenial companion ! We suit each other, Mr. Pauncefort, all the better, maybe, because there is a great deal in me that you don’t approve, and a great deal in you that I can’t understand. We are as far as the poles asunder, perhaps, in character ; but we are just the sort of people who can get on admirably together. What can you do with a man whose ideas are the same as your own ? Black is white, say you ; of course it is, answers he ; and you’re at a deadlock for the rest of the evening. Give me the man who

says, 'No, it isn't.' I can get on delightfully with him. By-the-bye, you will spend Christmas with us, I trust, Mr. Pauncefort? No county families, no would-be mediævalism,—boars' heads with lemons in their mouths, rejoicing retainers, fiddlers in the music-gallery, and so on; none of your Christmas-in-the-olden-time absurdities; master and mistress leading off Sir Roger de Coverley, with a ruck of servants and farm-labourers streaming behind, and the odour of the stables permeating the atmosphere; no roasted oxen, scorched outside and raw inside; no bales of blanketing, distributed amongst grateful peasantry, who will turn up their noses at the quality of your beef, and slander you because of the coarseness of your flannel. I suppose we do something benevolent in deference to the prejudices of our age. My daughter Marcia has *carte blanche*, and women seem to find that sort of thing rather amusing. For the rest, we shall be quite alone. I suppose the cook will insist on sending up that conventional cannon-ball, in the way of confectionery, which she calls a plum-pudding; but I promise you there shall be no further indication of what grocers and illustrated-newspaper proprietors entitle the 'festive season.'"

Mr. Pauncefort smiled: his smile was very beautiful,—all the more beautiful, perhaps, because it savoured rather of thought and sadness than of mirth.

"I have no wish to forget the festive season," he said, "though it has found me very lonely for the last fifteen years. But I am weak enough to entertain a lingering affection for the traditionary Christmas; and I shall be very sorry when its last vestiges have melted into the darkness of a forgotten and unregretted past. I like to hear 'the clear church-bells ring in the Christmas morn,' and to remember a Wanderer who was more homeless than I am, and who was the first great Teacher of the dignity of sorrow."

"Ah!" exclaimed Sir Jasper, shrugging his shoulders; "*pas connu, mon ami*. You remember what Voltaire says; or you don't, perhaps, and you'll be angry with me if I quote him. Let us part good friends, and meet to quarrel again at Christmas."

Mr. Pauncefort hesitated.

"You are very kind, but I——"

"You are heartily tired of our society, and don't want a second infliction of it."

"My dear Sir Jasper, I——"

"Oh, of course you will deny the fact. Diogenes is an impossibility in an age in which every man sends his boys to Eton. If you are not heartily sick of us, and have no better engagement, come to us at Christmas. You promise?"

"Yes, Sir Jasper; if my coming can please you."

He spoke to the Baronet, but he looked at the Baronet's daughter. The pale still face betrayed neither interest nor emotion this time. It was the face of a woman who listened, from mere politeness, to a discussion whose result was entirely indifferent to her.

"Good-night and good-bye, Sir Jasper. Good-night, Miss Denison."

He gave his hand to each, and was gone. He stopped for a moment outside the door,—the ponderous uncompromising door which closed upon him with such a sonorous reverberation.

"I wonder if Adam felt as I do, when the angel shut the gates of Paradise?" he thought; "but then Adam was banished for his *own* sin, and I——"

Half an hour afterwards, in his own room,—the pretty blue draperied chamber, where every thing smelt of a delicately perfumed pot-pourri which seemed peculiar to the Abbey; the home-like room, with a snug little writing-table and a capacious easy-chair wheeled close to a noble fire burning in a quaint old-fashioned grate,—alone in this room, George Pauncefort flung himself on his knees by the bed, and with his face hidden in his clasped hands, prayed long and fervently.

Sir Jasper Denison would have laughed aloud in amused amazement at the sight of that big broad-shouldered man kneeling in the reverent attitude of a little child. Sir Jasper would have been even more surprised if any one had told him the burden of the man's prayer:

"Oh, keep me from loving her! Paralyse all tenderness of feeling in this withered heart! Give me strength to accept my destiny, and to be patient unto the end!"

CHAPTER VI.

"ALL WITHIN IS DARK AS NIGHT."

MR. PAUNCEFORT adhered to the resolution he had declared at night, and left Scarsdale Abbey when there was only the faintest glimmer of light in a chill grey sky.

He let himself quietly out of the little side-door by which he had first entered the Abbey, and went away under the fading stars, while the great clock in the stables was striking

six. About a hundred yards from the house he stopped short, and looked back at the long range of windows, the closed shutters, the lowered blinds,—all blank, all dark. No eye to watch his departure; no pale regretful face shining out upon him, like one of those fading stars up yonder! Nothing!

He looked from the dark house up to the wide heaven. Ah, *there* the light was dawning, pale as yet, but brightening just a little with every passing moment.

"Shall I accept it as an omen?" he thought; "here only darkness, but the light there. Is my fate so hard that I should revolt against the hand that laid my burden upon me? There have been men who, of their own free will, for love of God and of their fellow-men, have cheerfully resigned as much as I have lost. Let me remember *that*, when the rebellious spirit rises in my breast and asks, 'Why should I suffer?'"

For three days and nights Mr. Pouncefort vanished from the neighbourhood of Scarsdale. He was away tramping on solitary country roads, under a dull November sky; tramping steadily, with his face to the chilly autumn wind, with his face to the rain, the sleet, the darkness; now talking to some tired outcast, lagging wearily on his beat; now exchanging a few cheery words with a passing rustic; sometimes quite alone for hours together; but always tramping steadily on, like a man who has backed himself heavily to walk a hundred miles in a hundred consecutive half-hours.

It was very late upon the fourth day after his departure from the Abbey, when Sir Jasper's tenant returned to the Hermitage. He walked back to his simple domain travel-stained and tired. All was prepared for him: pine-logs burning redly on a cheerful fire; a reading-lamp on a little table, trimmed and ready; an old worm-eaten arm-chair wheeled close to the wide hearth. The moonlight streamed in at the low lattice-window, and fell in a slanting line across that polished oaken floor, which might or might not be stained with the life-blood of the traditionary cavalier. The room looked very comfortable, half in the solemn light of the moon, half in the ruddy glow of the fire. It was as good a welcome as a lonely wanderer had any right to expect: and yet, ah me! how sad and cold it seemed to Sir Jasper's tenant! The titled backs of his favourite books, winking and blinking in the fire-light, seemed to smile at him: as who should say, "In us behold the harmless friends who know not weariness, the silent comforters in whose companionship there lurks no hidden danger."

Mr. Pouncefort's quiet servant came into the room, at the sound of the opening and shutting of the door. He found his master standing by the hearth, his elbow resting on an

angle of the chimney-piece, his eyes bent moodily on the fire.

"You are tired, Sir," the man said respectfully, as he lighted the lamp. It was a reading-lamp, with a deep green shade, and it only lighted the room with a subdued glimmer, but even in that doubtful light Andrew Milward, the valet, saw that his master's face was paler than usual, and that there was a worn look about the eyes and mouth that had not been there since the first month or so after the traveller's return to England.

"Yes, I am very tired; I have walked greater distances and longer hours this time."

"Shall I get you anything, Sir?"

"Yes, you may get me a cup of tea, the never-failing consolation of old women and—old bachelors. You have no occasion to look so anxiously at me, my dear Milward; you must expect a man to seem a little knocked up after doing ninety miles of a hilly country in four days of very uncertain weather. Get me that tea as quickly as you can. How do you find this place after the builders' work? They have not done away with its mediævalism, I am very glad to see. There are no radical changes?"

"Not at all, Sir. New flooring, new banisters on the staircase, new woodwork about the windows, a new stack of chimneys, and a few beams here and there, where the house seemed shaky; but everything quite in the old style, Sir."

Mr. George Pouncefort retired to his room on the upper story and made his toilet, which involved a great deal of cold water, a change of linen, and the substitution of a loose morning-coat for the velvet shooting-jacket, which he was wont to wear in his pedestrian rambles. It was only nine o'clock, and Sir Jasper's tenant had a long lonely evening before him—the first lonely evening after many pleasant hours of bright and genial companionship. He went back to his sitting-room. The queer old tea-pot was in its wonted place among the ashes; a faded red cloth curtain was drawn across the moonlit window, and the oaken panelling only reflected the cheery glow of the fire. Mr. Pouncefort filled and lighted his pipe, took a book at random from the shelf nearest to him, and began to read.

How many lines did he read? About twenty perhaps; then the hand holding the book slowly dropped by his side, the proud head sank forward on the broad breast, the dark eyes fixed themselves dreamily on the burning logs.

"And I have known such peace in this place!" mused Sir Jasper's tenant. "What have I lost, what have I lost, since I last sat alone beside this hearth?"

He could find no answer to that question. He had chosen

to break a resolution that had been almost a vow, and he was paying the penalty of his folly.

"Oh, fool, fool, fool!" he muttered presently; "fool not to have better estimated the peril of such associations—the horror of such a contrast!"

He went back to his book with a weary sigh. It was a delicate little masterpiece of the typographical art, a tiny volume of classic literature, published by Firmin Didot,—an expensive fancy for so poor a man as Sir Jasper's tenant—a volume to set a book-hunter's mouth watering with epicurean longing; but Mr. Pauncefort's hand dropped by his side a second time—his moody glances went back to the fire, not to be beguiled by delicate line-engravings, or pearly type, or quaint initial letters in scarlet printing-ink.

He restored the book to its place on the shelf presently, and began to walk slowly up and down the room with his arms folded and his head bent. The dark brows contracted over those thoughtful eyes, full of gloomy thoughts to-night, as it seemed. The hard lines about the mouth grew harder as the lonely tenant paced backwards and forwards in the dimly-lighted chamber.

"I have seen the room in which Martin Luther threw his ink-bottle at Satan," muttered Mr. Pauncefort by-and-by; "but nobody tells us whether the diabolical intruder took the hint and departed. There are devils that are not to be driven away by ink-bottles, or walked down by a ninety-miles' ramble in a hilly country."

He paced the room for nearly an hour with the same slow steady step, his head still bent, his brows still fixed in the same dark frown. Then with a suddenly impatient gesture he moved the lamp to a side-table, on which there stood an old-fashioned mahogany desk, brass-bound at the corners, and provided with a formidable lock. He unlocked this desk, took a quire of paper from the lowest partition, dipped his pen into the ink, and began to write:

*"The Hermitage, Scarsdale, near Roxborough.
November 30th, 1855.*

"DEAR WILLIAMS,—Will you take immediate steps to ascertain the exact whereabouts of '*that person*,' present mode of life, surroundings, and so on. I have a reason for——"

And here Sir Jasper's tenant came abruptly to a standstill, and began to bite the feathered end of his pen with that abstracted manner peculiar to a writer who finds some difficulty in the composition of his epistle. Mr. Pauncefort's difficulty

appeared of an unsurmountable nature, or was at any rate beyond his patience, for he tore the half-written page in fragments and flung them into the fire. Then leaning over his desk with the same moody expression of countenance that had distinguished him throughout that evening, he opened first one partition, then the other, with the idle abstracted manner of a man who has no motive for what he is doing.

There were the usual contents of an old-fashioned writing-desk lurking in those two dry wells of epistolary rubbish. There were the usual packets of faded letters, which it is so difficult to look at without a vague sense of pain—it is so much more than likely that some of the writers are dead ; so terribly probable that most of them are changed, and would blush to see the pale protestations and promises of the past, remembering how bitterly they have been belied. And hidden under those packets of letters there was something from which the wandering hand of Sir Jasper's tenant recoiled with a terrified start, as it might have done if, groping idly among withered leaves, it had lighted unawares upon a snake. The hand recoiled, and the dark face grew livid : but after just one moment's indecision, the hand brought the reptile to light.

It was a very innocent-looking serpent. Only a crimson morocco case, flat and square, and a little old-fashioned. Evidently a miniature case belonging to a period prior to the days in which scientific photographers arose to annihilate the simple artists who painted pretty simpering faces, very pink in the lights, and very blue in the shadows, smirking out of a background of burnt-sienna dots.

Mr. Pauncefort opened the case, and looked at the miniature. The snake was a very beautiful reptile. Keats's *Lamia* could scarcely have been lovelier of aspect than were the two faces which smiled the same smile on that piece of painted ivory.

Yes, two faces, and yet only one face. The duplicate resemblances of twin sisters smiled on the moody tenant of the Hermitage. The miniature was very exquisitely painted ; and never had two more beautiful faces beamed upon cold and lifeless ivory.

The sisters were in the earliest bloom of youth, the freshest splendour of beauty. Eyes darkly lustrous, dangerously lovely, as those with which Judith may have watched the slumbers of Holofernes—from which Cleopatra might have looked destruction on Marc Antony ; noses of an aquiline type, whose bold character gave a queen-like grandeur to those youthful faces ; lips whose crimson fulness reminded you of beautiful velvety fruits ripened under a southern sun, but in whose expression there lurked something which the physiognomist would have

shrunk from, distrustful and abhorrent; dark waving hair falling loose on snowy shoulders; rounded arms intertwined in sisterly embraces.

Sisters are always sisterly—in a picture. These were the things that George Pauncefort contemplated with that fixed frown upon his face, that ominous light in his eyes.

Suddenly he set his teeth together fiercely, and with his eyes still fixed upon the two faces, cried aloud:

"Twin vipers, hatched in your foul nests for the destruction of honest men: created to sting and torture the breasts that shelter you. Wherever you may be—you, the living—you, the dead—may God have that mercy upon your sins which I *cannot* feel! No, I have wrestled with the devil: but he is too strong for me, and I *cannot* forgive. Oh Thou who didst plead upon the Cross for Thy enemies, thou *couldst not* divorce Thyself from Thy Godhead. I am only man, and I can love, admire, worship; but I cannot imitate Thee."

He rose, took the miniature out of the case, and dropped it on the bare stone hearth. The faces on the painted ivory smiled up at him as he looked at them just for one moment; before he set his heel upon the picture and ground it into atoms.

CHAPTER VII.

DOROTHY'S CONQUEST.

DOROTHY TURSGOOD was a Roman Catholic. If she had been a fire-worshipper or a Mohammedan, a Thug or an adorer of Ashtoreth, and an implicit believer in the necessity of human sacrifices, she could have scarcely been regarded, in a spiritual point of view, with greater horror than she now was by the Protestant members of Sir Jasper's household. Temporarily regarded, Dorothy was a very nice girl, with simple winning manners, and a face that was almost as bright as a sunbeam; but in a theological sense she was an obstinate heretic, resolutely bent upon marching straight to destruction; getting up early in the morning to attend idolatrous ceremonies, and treasuring pagan idols in the shape of little gilt-edged and lace-paper-bordered engravings of unknown saints and martyrs. I don't suppose poor little Dorothy could have explained very distinctly the differences between her own faith and that of her fellow-servants. The Tursgoods were of Illi

bernian extraction, and Dorothy believed in the Pope, as her parents and ancestry had believed before her, as some splendid abstraction who, in supreme humility, condescended now and then to receive tribute in the way of halfpence even from so small a personage as Dorothy herself. Dorothy had the organ of veneration very fully developed under the ruddy brown hair that would not come straight, and was ready to believe pretty implicitly in everything that seemed good and beautiful and very high above her. If anything could have shaken the faith that had been taught her in her childhood, it would have been the influence of her young mistress; but Marcia Denison had no desire to make a proselyte of her simple-minded little maid.

"I had rather you should be a good Catholic than a bad Protestant, my darling," she said; "and I think you and I can read St. Thomas à Kempis together without entering into any abstract arguments about our different creeds. If we can only be Christians, Dorothy, I fancy we may hope to be forgiven any error in our choice between Paul and Apollos."

Dorothy had to go a very long way to perform her Sabbath devotions. The nearest Catholic chapel was an unpretending edifice, in a back district of the naval and military dépôt beyond Roxborough; and to this chapel Mr. Tursgood and his family had been wont to repair in a tax-cart every Sunday morning, ever since Dorothy could remember. Miss Denison was no exacting mistress, and Dorothy was still free to accompany her family to chapel on a Sunday morning, while Marcia walked alone to a little village church close to the gates of Scarsdale Park.

It is the morning after George Pouncefort's return to the Hermitage—a bright morning for November—and Dorothy has run across the park to the home-farm, in time to take her accustomed place in the bailiff's tax-cart. She is welcomed clamorously by younger sisters and brothers, who look upon her as a prodigy of learning and elegance; but she only receives a nod from her father, who is by no means a demonstrative man, and who condemns the teaching his daughter has received from Miss Denison as "a pack of Frenchified nonsense, like to turn the wench's head and make her too fine for service."

To-day Dorothy was not to return to Scarsdale in her father's cart. Her mistress had given her a holiday, in order that she might spend the day with a cousin, who was rather a stylish person, having served her time at a milliner's in Roxborough, and having lately united her fortunes to those of a dashing young clerk in the service of a brewer. With these

distinguished relations Dorothy was to dine, and they had undertaken to see her safely home before dusk, or, at any rate, as far as the gates of Scarsdale Park.

To Dorothy's mind this going out to dinner was a very great event ; more especially as she had a new bonnet—a real black-velvet bonnet, silk velvet, with sky-blue bows inside—wherewith to dazzle the experienced eyes of Selina Dobb. The clerk's name was Dobb ; but he was a very stylish person in spite of that plebeian and monosyllabic appellation. A man cannot help his name ; and Mr. Henry Adolphus Dobb's appearance on Sundays would have been dashing even if displayed by a scion of the house of Montmorency.

I am afraid Dorothy's mind was prone to wander that day in chapel, and that the new bonnet had a sadly distracting effect upon the pretty little head inside it. She tried very hard to keep her eyes fixed upon her book as she knelt meekly by her father's side ; but the frivolous fancies would go vagabondising away from the Aves and Paters which the rosy lips mechanically whispered.

Castleford is a military dépôt ; and the congregation at that little Roman-Catholic chapel was generally pretty liberally sprinkled with the martial element. On this particular Sunday there were a good many red-coats dotted about the place, and there were two near the altar to which Dorothy's eyes wandered now and then in spite of herself. These two special red-coats were worn by a couple of officers, one of whom seemed completely absorbed by the service in which he was assisting ; while the other, on the contrary, sat in a lounging attitude and stared about him, except when, in some especially solemn portion of the ceremonial, he dropped on his knees and mechanically assumed a reverential air.

It happened somehow that this inattentive officer's glances, wandering here, there, and everywhere, seemed to wander oft-est of all towards Dorothy's new bonnet. It was not the first time that Dorothy had seen this officer in chapel ; and last Sunday, and the Sunday before that, when she had only worn a very old shabby bonnet, she had observed the same phenomenon. The officer's eyes, roving here and there, fixed themselves very often upon herself. They were dark restless eyes, with a very vivid light in them ; an unhealthy-looking brightness, which we are apt to associate with the idea of incipient consumption ; and they shone out of a face that must once have been very handsome, but which now had a worn-out tired look upon it that considerably impaired its beauty. It was a face which a shrewd observer would have called "scampish ;" an insolent, defiant face, which might belong to a man accustomed to be at war with the world. No physiognomist could have pro-

nounced it a pleasant countenance ; but to Dorothy Tursgood it seemed the very ideal of heroic splendour.

Away from the realms of agriculture Sir Jasper's bailiff was by no means a keen or minute observer. The eyes of all the officers in Castleford barracks might have been roving towards Dorothy's pretty face, and Mr. James Tursgood none the wiser. He packed his two younger daughters and an ungainly boy into the cart, which had been standing during the service in an adjacent yard, and nodded a good-bye to Dorothy as he clambered into the vehicle.

"No gadding after dark, Doll," he said in a warning voice ; "Selina Dobb's got a house of her own, and a husband to keep her ; but you've got to earn your living in service. Don't let me hear no complaints of you when I goes to the Abbey."

Dorothy pouted, and then murmured something dutiful. The farm-bailiff was her father, and she was bound to obey him, though his manners were rather rough ; but the society of Alderney cows and squealing young pigs, however lively, can scarcely be expected to have a refining influence. The cart drove away, and Dorothy was left alone in all the grandeur of her velvet bonnet to find her way to that damp little terrace of newly-built houses in which Selina and her husband had taken up their abode.

Dorothy had heard high mass in that little chapel every Sunday morning from her childhood upwards, and there was a good deal of hand-shaking to be gone through with young women of her own age, to say nothing of hobbledehoy brothers and sheepish swains "keeping company" with the young women. There was considerable discussion about the new bonnet ; and when at last Dorothy disengaged herself from her friends, it was ever so much past one. One o'clock was Mr. and Mrs. Dobb's dinner-hour, not of their own free choice, but to suit the habits of an arbitrary baker, who cleared out his oven at that hour, and flung back the joints intrusted to him upon the hands of their owners with a stony indifference as to whether the cloth might be laid, or the beer fetched from the newly-opened tavern.

Dorothy hurried breathlessly across a patch of waste ground, and past the unfinished streets which straggled here and there upon the dusty outskirts of Castleford. The red coats had filed away from the chapel while her father delivered his brief lecture, the two officers walking by the side of the men ; and Dorothy had almost forgotten the roving eyes that had seemed so often attracted by her new bonnet. She was close to the new terrace,—it was called Amanda Terrace,—when she became conscious of a footstep behind her ; a footstep that loitered when she loitered, and hurried when she hurried. Her breath

came quicker, and her heart began to bump ~~up and~~ down as fast as if she had been running a race. Could anybody be following her? The heart that as yet had only panted for new bonnet-ribbons and coral necklaces began all at once to beat with a strange emotion, which seemed a pleasure so intense that it almost merged into pain. Perhaps a poet might believe in this as the earliest thrill of a maiden's first love; but, alas, maidenly vanity had a good deal more to do with it. Dorothy caught a glimpse of her pursuer as she turned a sharp corner; and brief though that glimpse, it was quite long enough to show her a red coat and a pair of brilliant black eyes. Then it was that the bailiff's daughter felt her heart swell with a delicious triumph. She began to think that she had MADE A CONQUEST. A conquest! and she was going to Selina Dobb, who had inflicted upon her the minutest details of so many conquests of a military character, and who had ended by marrying a brewer's clerk. Oh, how delicious it would be to retire to Selina's bed-room after dinner, on some pretence of examining the new bonnet, and then and there communicate to her the history of this wonderful triumph!

She was going through a little mental rehearsal of the delightful disclosure, when she came to Amanda Villas, and perceived the lounging figure of Henry Adolphus Dobb, in an intensely cut-away coat, lolling against the little iron gate, and provided with a short clay-pipe, the bowl of which presented the head of a ferociously-disposed bull dog displaying two rows of enamelled teeth, whose whiteness agreeably contrasted with the blackened clay.

"Holloa!" exclaimed Mr. Dobb, taking his pipe out of his mouth, and addressing himself to Dorothy's pursuer. (Good gracious! thought the bailiff's daughter, could it be possible that her cousin's husband was on familiar terms with a magnificent creature in a scarlet coat?) "How do, Dorothy?" said Mr. Dobb; "sorry to see you looking so sharp set; for the butcher forgot to send the mutton last night. We *might* have dined upon the turnips, but unluckily the greengrocer's boy has got the measles, so they didn't come; but if the kindly welcome of two honest hearts, and the smell of the dinners from the bakehouse at the corner, content ye, they are yours."

Dorothy was not alarmed by this exordium. She was very well acquainted with the habits of her cousin's husband, who was that social nuisance, a facetious young man; a young man who would have made a bad pun at a funeral, or struck a serio-comic attitude beside the bed of an expiring friend. He was a constant frequenter of music-halls and theatres; believed in himself implicitly as an accomplished mimic and

an amateur Charles Mathews. He was a man who considered agreeable conversation utterly incompatible with the smallest admixture of common-sense. He was a perambulatory edition of Mr. Hotten's *Slang Dictionary* and Mr. Maddison Morton's farces; and there was no discussion, however solemn, no question, however serious, for which he could find any language but slang.

"Pass on, fair damsel, to our modest mansion," he said to Dorothy; "I did but jest with thee: the banquet waits within. Ho, my lieutenant, Michael Cassio! what news? Has the royal daughter of the second James departed this life? or have the phlegmatic citizens of Amsterdam possessed themselves of Holland?"

These playful inquiries were addressed to the officer who had followed Dorothy: but that gentleman only replied by a suppressed yawn, and a careless "How d'ye do, Dobb?" He had a lazy indifference, that was far from complimentary to the society in which he happened to find himself; and he had a lounging, loitering gait, which was the very opposite of the attitude-striking and cellar-flap-break-down dancing of the vivacious Dobb, who considered his reputation as a "delightful rattle" in imminent danger whenever adverse circumstances obliged him to hold his tongue and restrain the comic activity of his muscles for five consecutive minutes. The lounging officer was a certain Gervoise Catheron, sub-lieutenant of marines, an acquaintance of the playful Dobb, and an inveterate billiard-player. The neutral ground of a billiard-room over a tobaccoist's shop in Castleford market place had brought the brewer's clerk and the lieutenant together; and some little indulgence displayed by Mr. Dobb with regard to a small debt of honour had brought about a kind of intimacy between the two men.

Poor little Dorothy felt quite crest-fallen as she entered her Cousin Selina's prim best parlour. She had not made a conquest, after all. The dark-eyed officer had not been tracking her footsteps from the chapel to Amanda Villas, but had come that way to see his friend Mr. Dobb. Under the depressing influence of this disappointment, Dorothy was quite indifferent to her cousin's critical remarks upon her new bonnet.

"My goodness!" exclaimed Selina, looking out of the window, "there's Henry Adolphus talking to one of his military friends. He is such a favourite with the officers! but they don't often come down *this* way; Amanda Villas are so *very* retired."

Dorothy's heart, dull and sluggish of beat for the last five minutes, began to flutter with revived hope. "Have you ever seen that gentleman before?" she asked shyly.

"Well, I can't call to mind that I have. But Henry Adolphus is so intimate with the officers. He is so very lively, you know, and his society is so much sought after."

The two women stood at the window, screened by a little stand of geraniums and the voluminous festoons of a pair of stiffly-starched white curtains, knitted by Selina's industrious hands. They watched Mr. Dobb and his companion with admiring interest; Selina impressed by her husband's distinguished talents, and rejoicing in the idea of those envious feelings that were likely to be aroused in the breasts of her neighbours by this exhibition of Mr. Dobb's intimate relations with a sub-lieutenant of marines.

The officer lounged away presently; but his departing speech must have been as a dagger in the breast of any listening neighbour:

"Good-day to you, Dobb. I'll look round again in the afternoon for a smoke."

He nodded, and departed very slowly, with a listless step and many a furtive glance towards the leafy screen behind which Dorothy was watching. She saw the glances, and sat down to her cousin's dinner-table with cheeks that bloomed like peonies, to be rallied upon her blushes by the brewer's clerk.

"'My love is like the red, red rose,' which is frequently sung out of tune. I know all about it, Dorothy; and the gentleman might be considered eminently handsome if it wasn't for his red hair and the popular prejudice against a decided goggle. I consider a hump rather an advantage than otherwise, as a man's coat-collar sits all the better for it," exclaimed Mr. Dobb as he flourished his carving-knife and fork above a baked shoulder of mutton. "You know your own degrees: sit down; 'the funeral baked meats,' &c. &c. How's the governor, Dorothy? all serene? And our estimable friend, the Baronet? I hope he didn't take my refusal of his last invitation to dinner *too* much to heart. I appreciate his friendly intentions, but the society of the aged bloke is apt to pall upon the youthful intellect; and at his last feed I had occasion to complain of the viands. The tripe and onions were overdone; the fricasseed beef-sausages were not up to the mark; the iced pudding was sloppy; and the champagne the ham was stewed in was *not* Cliquot. I forgive him. 'Cassio, I love thee; but never more be officer of mine!'"

Dorothy ate her dinner almost in silence, and ate very little. The agreeable Dobb only required an occasional admiring giggle to keep him going for a whole afternoon; so the bailiff's daughter was not called upon to talk much. After dinner she sat on the hard little horsehair sofa by her Cousin Selina, and

discussed a heavenly sleeve and an enchanting trimming on the cross, which, according to Mrs. Dobb, had only just "come up;" while the facetious Henry Adolphus brewed a small jug full of a certain rum and gin punch, known among his intimates as "Dobb's mixture," being a cunning admixture of liquors originally devised by that gentleman, and the compounding of which was such a soul-absorbing occupation as to keep him comparatively quiet.

It was half-past three o'clock when Gervoise Catheron lounged past the window, in mufti this time. Dorothy's cheeks grew red as she recognised him. The sofa was opposite the window, and Dorothy had been stealing little furtive glances athwart Selina's geraniums ever since dinner. Perhaps he would not come, after all; or he might come very late, and Dorothy was to go back to the Abbey before dusk, and it would be dark so very, very soon this November afternoon.

"Open, locks, whoever knocks!" bawled Mr. Dobb, as the lieutenant went by the railings; "the footman has been abruptly dismissed on account of intemperant proclivities, and the family plate is at our banker's, so the door is only on the latch. 'Turn, gentle hermit,' turn the handle, and shove the lower panels of our portal; for the paint,

' Infected by the dampness of the air,
Is sticky, and doth cling, like women's lips
That meet the false lips of deceitful man,
And drink the poison of a traitor's kiss.'

Lines from an unfinished epic by H. A. Dobb, Esq., poet-laureate to her Majesty the Queen of the Cannibal Islands."

While Mr. Dobb had been thus giving free indulgence to a humorous fancy, his sensible better-half had opened the door and admitted the distinguished guest, who looked as much out of his element in the prim little parlour as he had looked in the chapel. He dropped listlessly into the chair offered him by Mrs. Dobb, and languidly accepted the glass of punch presented to him by Henry Adolphus, who had contrived to make the room fragrant with the odours of lemon-peel and rum.

Mr. Dobb introduced his and his wife's cousin to his friend Gervoise Catheron with divers facetious flourishes of the music-hall order. Poor little Dorothy could only sit with her eyelids cast down under the glances of the officer. He made a languid attempt to talk to her, but she only answered him by monosyllables; and as the lively Dobb very rarely held his tongue for two minutes together, the conversation was a very brief one. Gervoise Catheron asked her a few questions. Did she object to the smell of cigar-smoke? did she live near Roxborough? was she going home that evening?

Mrs. Dobb's maid-of-all-work brought in a tea-tray while the two men were smoking and drinking, and Selina explained that they were going to drink tea much earlier than usual, in order to escort their cousin as far as Scarsdale Park before night.

"Dorothy is living as—as companion with Miss Denison," said Mrs. Dobb, who could not bring herself to pronounce that humiliating word "lady's maid" before her aristocratic guest; "and it's a long walk from here to Scarsdale—three miles to the park, and quite a mile from the park-gates to the Abbey; but Henry Adolphus likes a nice long walk, so we promised to see Dorothy as far as the gates."

Mr. Catheron replied that he resembled Mr. Dobb in that respect, inasmuch as there was nothing he liked better than a long walk on a fine winter evening; and he volunteered to accompany the Dobbs and their cousin as far as Scarsdale. Dorothy's heart set up an actual tumult after this. Ah, it certainly was a conquest; and surely her triumph must be perceived by Selina, who had been so very quick to discern any of her own victories over the susceptible military lounging in the High Street, in which the fair young milliner served her apprenticeship.

The two women talked of Mr. Catheron as they put on their bonnets in an upper chamber; but Selina evidently considered the charms of her husband's society quite sufficient attraction to lure all the officers in the *Army List* to Amanda Villas; so Dorothy's gratified vanity swelled her breast to bursting, and had no chance of an outlet in friendly sympathy. She went down stairs, blooming radiantly in her new bonnet, and found that Mr. Dobb and his friend had finished the punch and were smoking their cigars on the doorstep. The two men made pay for Mrs. Dobb and her cousin, and they all left the house in rather straggling order; but Mr. Catheron somehow happened to be next Dorothy, and he was not slow to seize upon his advantage.

"Give your wife your arm, Dobb," he said; "I'll take care of Miss — I beg your pardon, I didn't quite hear your name just now."

"Tursgood," murmured Dorothy.

"Tursgood—that's not such a pretty name as Dorothy. Do you know you are the first Dorothy I ever met with, except one, and she's a historical personage?"

"I know history; Miss Marcia taught me. Was it Sophia Dorothea, who was married to George the First, and very unhappy?—poor thing! and, oh, how I hate that wicked Countess of Platen who trampled on Count Konigsmark's face! Was it Sophia Dorothea you meant?"

"No, I mean Dorothy Varden, the blacksmith's daughter. Do you know I think you're something like her, Miss Tursgood?"

"You are fond of novels, Sir?" cried Dorothy.

"No, I am not; I find 'em confoundedly slow nowadays: used to read 'em when I was a boy; read nothing now but Holt's betting-lists and the *Sunday Times*."

It was a long way from Castleford to Scarsdale Park, but it seemed very short to Dorothy; and yet Mr. Catheron was far from the most amiable or intellectual companion a young woman could have. He had very little to say for himself; and what he did say was chiefly expressive of hatred and contempt for everybody and everything in the world, and a profound sense of the ill-usage he had suffered at the hands of people who had injured and insulted him by getting on better than himself. He was not an agreeable companion; he was only a good-looking scamp, with a handsome face, worn and faded by late hours and hard drinking; but he was just the sort of man who can generally find any number of women ready to lend him money and adore him. Poor little Dorothy had never walked arm-in-arm with an officer before, and the happiness engendered out of gratified vanity imparted a factitious charm to the society of her companion. She was very happy—as happy as a child who wears a woman's dress for the first time, with all a child's ignorance of the heritage of care and sorrow which may go along with that apparel of womanhood.

The great bare trees in Scarsdale Park looked black against a moonlight sky when Dorothy bade good-bye to her friends at the gates. A son of the lodge-keeper was to escort her thence to the Abbey, so the Dobbs had no need of any further anxiety about her.

"Good-night, Selina; good-night, Mr. Dobbs; I am so much obliged to you for coming this long way."

"A long way!" cried Mr. Catheron; "by Jove! it's been the shortest walk I ever took in my life."

He could see Dorothy's blushes in the moonlight as she dropped him a little curtsy and murmured good-night before she tripped away upon the silver-shining sward with the lodge-keeper's boy by her side.

She was scarcely out of sight of the gates when she broke into a skipping step that was almost a dance, and then a little thrilling song came gushing from her lips like the joyous warbling of some happy bird.

And it was all because she had made a conquest. Conceited little Dorothy, foolish little Dorothy, to think so much of a few stereotyped compliments from a good-looking scamp.

Mr. Dobb was not so well pleased with the employment of his Sabbath evening.

"It may be very jolly to have swell acquaintances," he remarked to his wife, as he ate his supper; "but my friend in the spurs has consumed my last cabana, and imbibed by far the larger modicum of the ambrosian beverage brewed for the general joy of the whole table; to say nothing of his borrowing half-a-sovereign from me when we parted company in the High Street just now."

CHAPTER VIII.

AN UNWELCOME LETTER.

MARCIA DENISON sat in a comfortable little nook by the fire-place in an amber drawing-room, whose shrouded grandeurs had something of a ghastly look in the chill wintry light. Christmas was close at hand, and Marcia was employed in carrying out certain arrangements for the comfort of her poor, in conjunction with the curate of Scarsdale, a very simple-minded young man, and a devoted admirer of Miss Denison, whose serene presence was apt to affect him with a temporary paralysis of his intellectual faculties.

Yes, he was a very meek young man; with smooth flaxen hair, which no amount of manipulation from the hot tongs of the village barber could have tortured into curl; and mild blue eyes, whose gentleness of expression almost melted into a watery weakness, suggestive of cold in the head. He was not a happy young man, for he despised himself, and he adored Miss Denison; but he would have died any manner of death—from being hurled headlong from the topmost pinnacle of Roxborough Cathedral, to being torn piecemeal by half-a-dozen of the big draught-horses on Sir Jasper's home-farm—rather than have rendered up the secret of his idolatry; for Miss Denison was an heiress, and it was possible that his devoted love might have been confounded with the mercenary yearning of the fortune hunter. So Mr. Winstanley Silbrook allowed concealment to feed upon his damask cheek, and only regretted that the agonies of his hidden passion did not consume the peachy and unromantic bloom of his beardless visage. He would like to have carried his sufferings on his brow, inscribed in unmistakable characters, which Marcia must have read every time she saw him, and which might in the end have inspired

the placid love that grows out of pity—a sentiment which is as the weakest skim-milk when compared with the fire-water of a genuine unreasoning affection. There is no social law which forbids a man to carry what characters he pleases upon his brow; and the delicacy which prevented Mr. Silbrook revealing his passion in any form of words could not have hindered him from avowing it in every feature of his face. But unluckily he was not gifted with what is generally called a speaking face. He might have carried the secrets of an empire under that mild and meaningless mask, more inscrutable than the marble brow of a Napoleon, looming massively above unfathomable eyes. His heart had been slowly breaking for the last three months, and there were no outward tokens of the ruin within; unless, indeed, occasional pimples—with an obstinate tendency to gather on a forehead, which, but for pimples, might have been Shakespearian, and apt to muster stealthily in the dead of the night, like a rising of Chartists on Kennington Common—might be taken as evidence of the inward struggle for ever going on behind that brow.

Mr. Silbrook was the most modest of men; but if he had a strong point, he felt that strong point was his brow. To-day he had brushed his smooth flaxen hair away from the bony prominences which phrenologists had mapped out for him in the most flattering manner, and he presented a shiny expanse of forehead to Miss Denison's contemplative eyes. He was painfully nervous in the presence of his divinity, and it was a considerable relief to him this morning to find that Marcia was not alone. Dorothy Tursgood was seated before a little table at some distance from her mistress, ready to act as secretary, and swelling with the importance of her duty. The business was rather a long one; but the curate was unutterably happy, deliciously ill at ease, in a tumult of love and sheepishness, as he sat opposite to Miss Denison, with a list of names in his hand, and suggested the people who were to receive help, and the kind of help most required by them. If the list could have gone on and on, like the endless web in a paper mill,—if he could have sat upon the hearth-rug for ever, with his shining forehead reflecting the glow of the fire, and incipient pimples basking in the ruddy blaze,—how happy he might have been! But the clocks never stop, except in fairy tales, where the princesses go to sleep for a century at a stretch, to wake, beautiful and smiling, when Prince Charming comes to claim them. The grey old boatman never lays down his oars: the "plash-plash" goes on for ever, even when our ears are beguiled by sweeter sounds into a fatal unconsciousness of that solemn measure. Winstanley Silbrook, sitting in the amber drawing-room at Scarsdale, forgot that he had any other duty than that

of assisting Miss Denison in her benevolent arrangements ; and even when the business was finished, he loitered still, very loth to dissolve the spell which bound him to that comfortable hearth.

"I have ordered luncheon for you in the dining-room, Mr. Silbrook," Marcia said, during the pause that succeeded the completion of the morning's business. "You know papa's habits ; he takes nothing but a biscuit and a little wine-and-water between breakfast and dinner ; so you will excuse his joining you. I am quite an old maid myself, and take a cup of tea at this time."

The curate blushed violently, and underwent a sharp attack of that mental paralysis to which he was subject in Miss Denison's society. He was thinking how some bold adventurer, some penniless Irishman in the military line, might have struck in here with a florid protestation against the epithet 'old maid,' as applied to the loveliest and most bewitching of womankind. The very thought of what the audacious adventurer might have said was too much for Mr. Silbrook, who felt his bashfulness blazing in his cheeks, and burning in every incipient pimple on his brow.

"No, thank you, Miss Denison," he said, shifting his hat nervously from one hand to the other ; "I very rarely take luncheon, or, indeed, anything at this time, unless perhaps dinner ; three o'clock being, in point of fact, my usual dinner-hour—or would-be usual—except that my duties render me so very uncertain. No, thank you ; really, I would rather not ; and, in fact, I——" dropping his hat and looking at his watch ; and then picking up his hat before returning his watch to his waistcoat-pocket—"thank you, no ; must really be going, for my duties at this time are so"—decides in favour of the watch—"multi—numer—mult—" strikes upon a verbal rock, and goes to pieces—"numer-farious."

But in spite of the solemn call of duty, the curate seemed inclined to linger, standing on the hearth-rug with his hat in his hand, and some demoniac impulse within his breast prompting him every moment to put his elbow on the broad marble chimney-piece, and sweep away a small fortune in the shape of old Dresden and Chelsea ware. He looked with a despairing gaze at a little tea-tray which was brought in presently for Miss Denison, as an unhappy wretch who had just swallowed poison might look towards the vessel containing its only antidote.

"If you will not take any luncheon, you will perhaps take a cup of tea and a biscuit," Marcia said kindly. "Fetch another cup and saucer, Dorothy."

The curate stammered something unintelligibly expressive

of rapture, and seated himself placidly, after putting his hat in the coal-scuttle. Those large watery blue eyes were of very little use to him unassisted by spectacles; and the admiring gaze which dwelt so fondly upon Marcia Denison only saw an indistinct white shadow, with features that flickered in and out like gas burning in a high wind.

Dorothy waited on Miss Denison and her guest, and handed Mr. Silbrook his cup of tea and the sugar-basin, at which he made little pecks with the tongs like a short-sighted bird. He sat with his cup sliding backwards and forwards in his saucer, conversing in nervous jerks; and he stirred his tea more persistently than is compatible with easy manners.

"Yes, Miss Denison," he began. The "yes" bore no relation to anything that preceded it, but was only a kind of conversational header, by which the curate plunged desperately into the trackless ocean of small-talk. "Yes, Miss Denison, I was about to observe that—thank you; not any more." This to Dorothy, who hovered over the afflicted young man with the sugar-basin and a plate of biscuits, to his torment and distraction; for he had already found that a biscuit was the incarnation of a hard dry cough; and he had been for the last five minutes struggling under a perfect shower-bath of crumbs. "Yes, Miss—Cracknells—I was about to say that the poor have every reason to congratulate themselves upon their good fortune this winter—last year—the biscuits—er—cold—being peculiarly severe." Here Mr. Silbrook weakly yielded to the tempter, and took another instrument of torture, obtrusively branded with the names of its makers, which glared at him as he conversed. "The weather, as I have observed, was really very severe; and the Abbey being untenanted—though your housekeeper, I am sure, was a great assistance to us in the way of soup and coals; but this year we are much better off, as beyond your most valuable co-operation, we have an anonymous benefactor."

"An anonymous benefactor?"

"Yes, Miss Denison," responded the curate, who had been imprudent enough to bite his biscuit, in the expectation of a much longer pause in the conversation, and found himself sputtering in a floury manner that redoubled his confusion. "Yes, Miss Denison; we have an anonymous benefactor. Upon the first Sunday of every month, for the last six or seven months, a sum of money,—gold wrapped in a bank-note, sometimes to the amount of ten pounds, sometimes more—has been dropped into our poor box—no one has been able to discover by whom. There has been no direction as to how the money was to be appropriated—no scrap of writing, not even

the initials of the donor ; only the money. I need not tell you that we have done our best to dispose of it wisely."

"And you have never made any guess as to the identity of the person who gives this money?"

"Never. Our congregation is small, and, with the exception of two or three families, by no means rich. I have heard," said the curate, forgetting his bashfulness in the gusto with which he discussed what was evidently a favourite subject,— "I have heard, Miss Denison, of people committing DREADFUL CRIMES, and giving large sums of money to the poor ever afterwards; though it is difficult to imagine by what mode of reasoning these unhappy heathens can arrive at the conclusion, that giving money which you don't want to people you haven't injured, can atone for the wrong done to the people you have injured. But the human mind is—the er—human mind," repeated Mr. Silbrook hopelessly; finding himself suddenly involved in a philosophical argument, from whose appalling entanglements he saw no chance of extrication; "the human mind is—no thank you." This to Dorothy, who assails him with a second cup of tea. "Really, Miss Denison, I have intruded upon you so long, that—er—good-morning."

Marcia shook hands with him, and dismissed him with a cordial smile. She had no idea that the hopeless gaze of those mild blue eyes meant idolatry; she ascribed their pensively imploring expression to constitutional weakness.

At twenty-two Marcia was quite a woman, and felt old enough to look serenely down upon bashful curates with almost a motherly kindness. She sat for some time looking idly at the fire after Mr. Silbrook had left her, while Dorothy sewed meekly in her retired corner, and mused wonderingly upon the mysterious patron of the Searsdale poor. But by-and-by Miss Denison aroused herself suddenly from her reverie, and took an open letter from a table near her,—a letter written on foreign paper, in a feminine hand; a hand which was bold and dashing, and masculine in character, but still very obviously a woman's hand; for surely the man never yet lived who underlined every other word and adorned every *y* and *g* with a loop an inch long. Marcia read the letter, which was a very long one, with a thoughtful expression on her face and then rose from her low chair and left the room, with the flimsy sheets of paper still in her hand. Dorothy looked after her mistress with a wondering expression. Marcia Denison, so calm and placid, had been obviously disturbed and moodily thoughtful to-day since the arrival of the morning post and that flimsy foreign letter.

Miss Denison went straight to the library, where her father was sitting before an enormous fire, with a pile of reviews

and newspapers on a table by his side. He tossed a paper away from him impatiently as Marcia entered the room.

"If people would only find something to write about before they take up their pens!" he muttered; "but then I suppose there are times in which the literature of the world would come to a dead stop, universal bankruptcy. And to think that we should read any trash just because it happens to have been written yesterday, while the dust gathers upon volumes that hold the garnered wisdom of departed Titans! A man poisons his wife in Seven Dials to-day and we are ready to wade through half-a-dozen pages of evidence in small type to-morrow, while perhaps not one among ten of us would care to lift the mouldering folios that contain the trials of a Strafford and a Stuart, a Russell and a Sydney, from their forgotten places on our bookshelves. Heigho!" exclaimed the Baronet, breaking down into a long dreary yawn; "what do you want, Marcia? The curate has gone, I suppose, and the benevolent business is over? What letter is that in your hand, Marcia?"

"A letter from Mrs. Harding, the handsome widow whom we saw so much of at Homburg. Do you remember giving her a kind of general invitation to visit us here?"

Sir Jasper yawned and reflected.

"Did I invite her? Yes, it's very likely I did; a charming woman, vivacious, *spirituelle*, plays *ecarté* as well as any *gandin* who has served his apprenticeship at a crack club in the Rue Royale; sings a little, doesn't she, Spanish and German ballads, with an accompaniment on the guitar? Ah, yes, I remember her perfectly, and remember being very much pleased with her—a florid style of woman, but amazingly agreeable. Let her come by all means. When does she talk of coming?"

"Almost immediately; that is to say, between this and Christmas. I'll read you the passage in her letter."

Marcia turned over the flimsy leaves, and selected a paragraph in one of them.

"And now, dearest Miss Denison, I am going to ask your permission to avail myself of your accomplished papa's more than cordial invitation——"

"More than cordial," muttered the Baronet; "what a pity that cordiality is a kind of intellectual effervescence, which expires as it effervesces! I had forgotten the existence of the woman. Go on, Marcia."

"Your papa's more than cordial invitation, so often repeated during that delightful stay at Homburg, in which I so enjoyed your congenial society. May I come, dear Miss Denison? I am such a frank spontaneous creature myself, that I accept your dear papa's kind speeches at their fullest value—as I am sure I may—may I not, dear Miss Denison?"

"You may as well omit the dear Miss Denisons and the dear papas," exclaimed Sir Jasper testily. "How I execrate a woman's letter! Is she coming or is she not?"

"So," continued Marcia, "if your house is not already full of visitors, I shall be very glad to spend Christmas with you. I have been staying in Paris since I left Homburg, and my friends here are kindly anxious to keep me still longer; but my heart yearns for an English Christmas, and for long pleasant talks with you and your dear papa. Therefore, dear Miss Denison, I shall wait one word from you to say yes or no; and if the answer be 'yes,' I shall cross immediately, spend a day or two in London, and then make my way to Scarsdale Abbey.' What is the answer to be, papa?"

"Yes, by all means. The woman has been invited, and the woman must come. She was very agreeable at Homburg; but I'm afraid she will be rather too florid for England. However, at the worst, she'll amuse us."

"But papa," said Marcia, thoughtfully, "have you ever considered how little we know of her? Our acquaintance was such an accidental one; and—she was not in the best set at Homburg."

Sir Jasper shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"What do I know about best or worst sets?" he exclaimed. "The woman amused me. She seemed to know plenty of people; and she is a lady—of the florid order, certainly. She curtsies gracefully, knows how to get in and out of a carriage without plunging, has hands which have never done any work, and can eat asparagus or artichokes without making herself disagreeable; and then she is remarkably handsome, and dresses divinely. I should give five or six hundred pounds for a good example of Etty, without the dress. Mrs. Harding's flesh-tints are finer than Etty's, and her draperies are as good as Stothard's; so why should we not have her to light up our rooms in this dreary winter weather?"

"I thought you had set your face against society, papa."

"Yes, against county society,—the ordinary jog-trot sort of thing which goes on for ever; but I have no objection to an occasional visitor. A passing pilgrim newly arrived from Vanity Fair will be welcome; and he shall rest himself at our hearth, and bring us tidings of the dancing-booths and the circuses and the merry-go-rounds, the newest delusions of the popular political prestigiator, the mountebanks who are in luck, and the mountebanks who are out of luck; the births and deaths and marriages, the bankruptcies and divorces, the family quarrels and fashionable scandals, and all the fun of the fair. Don't look at me so despondently, Marcia; but write a civil letter to Mrs. Harding, telling her to come."

"I don't think she will care to stay very long in an empty house, papa. She seemed to me a person who could scarcely exist without gaiety and excitement."

"In that case let her go away and exist somewhere else. Besides, we shall not be quite alone; Mr. Pauncefort will spend Christmas with us, and he can help to amuse her."

"Oh, papa, Mr. Pauncefort is the very last person in all the world to suit Mrs. Harding."

"Good gracious me, Marcia," cried Sir Jasper, peevishly, "how many more objections are you going to make? I tell you again the woman has been asked to come, and the woman must be allowed to come. If she doesn't like us, she can leave us; if we don't like her we needn't ask her a second time. Go and write your letter, and don't be persistent, Marcia."

"Very well, papa; it must be as you please."

The letter was written. It was not a very cordial letter; for Miss Denison did not like Mrs. Harding, and was quite unable to feign a liking which she did not feel. But the epistle was courteous and conciliatory, and the answer came by return of post. Mrs. Harding acknowledged her dearest Miss Denison's affectionate letter, and announced her intended arrival at the Abbey on the twenty-second of December.

CHAPTER IX.

A FLORID WIDOW.

THE shrill winter winds shrieked among the rocking branches in Scarsdale wood, and howled dismally all through the long moonlight nights in which Sir Jasper's tenant lay awake in the darkness, thinking of all the eight-and-thirty years that lay behind him, and of the near horizon that bounded his present life.

Little as we know of him we may take it for granted that there has been failure and disappointment of some kind within the compass of those eight-and-thirty years. A man does not voluntarily spend the prime of his manhood in desultory wanderings amid the wildest regions of the earth, and return to his native country only to bury himself in the dusky recesses of a wood, without some very strong reason for his conduct.

If George Pauncefort was a poor man, the world was all

before him ; and he was no listless idler likely to hold himself aloof from the battle-field of life because the contest was hot and fierce, and the crown of victory uncertain. The smouldering fires of an energetic and passionate nature were hidden under the quiet of his breast, now so seldom stirred by any violent emotion ; a look, a word, a sudden outburst of the man's actual self predominating for a moment over the calm presentment of himself which he offered to the world betrayed the slumbering force, the hidden fire. A lion reconciled to his narrow cage, and feeding meekly from the hands of his keeper, will show himself king of the forest now and then, despite the excellence of his taming ; and there were moments in which Sir Jasper's tenant rebelled against the chains he had imposed upon himself. These were the times in which he was wont to turn his back on the calm quiet of his hermitage and the grave companionship of his beloved books, to tramp over grey moorlands and climb bleak hill-tops under a sunless winter sky. These were the times in which he was wont to start upon that walking-match with Satan, at whose weary close he was sometimes fain to confess himself beaten, and to bring the fiend home with him to his quiet retreat, to occupy the empty chair at his hearth, and to glare hideously at him athwart the fumes of his faithful meerschaum. Sometimes he was victorious, and out-walked the demon, parting company with him amongst the shrill winds upon a heathy ridge of moorland, to tramp homeward cheerily, with his face towards the sky, and all the angry fires vanished out of his eyes.

Mr. Pauncefort had spent a great deal of his time under the bleak wintersky since his visit to the Abbey ; but he had returned to the Hermitage a few days before Christmas to find a note from Sir Jasper lying amongst the newspapers on his table ; a note which reminded him in very cordial terms of his promise to spend Christmas at the Abbey, and claim the fulfilment of that promise.

George Pauncefort twisted the little missive round and round his strong fingers, as he stood by the window looking out at the withered fern and the leafless underwood swaying and creaking drearily in the wind.

"Shall I go ?" he thought. "Why not ? Is there any danger to *her* in my presence ? Not a jot ! Have I not seen her clear grey eyes fixed upon me with such a tender calmness as may shine in them when she looks at her father ? What if I am a passionate fool, who has learnt no lesson from a blighted youth and a wasted manhood ? what if I am a fool in my dotage, and long to lay my heart and soul at the feet of an angel, as I laid them once before the hidden foot of a fiend ? Will *she* be the worse for my folly ? What can I

seem to her but an elderly misanthrope, whom she tolerates out of the pitiful tenderness of her nature, as she tolerates tiresome old women in Scarsdale village, and noisy children at the Sunday school? It is one of the Christian duties of her life to be kind to such a man as I; and if there is danger in her kindness, it is a danger that threatens me, and me alone. Yes, I will go."

It was on the twenty-second of December that Mr. Pauncefort arrived at this decision. He ordered his servant to prepare for the visit to the Abbey, and to be ready to accompany him there on the twenty-fourth; and in the mean while he buried himself amongst his books, and lay awake in the moonless nights thinking of his past life. It is strange how perpetually the dreaded ghosts of that remote past had haunted him of late, and how often in his dreams the voices of the dead sounded in his ears, while youthful faces, whose bloom and freshness had long vanished from this earth, smiled upon him, and mocked him with their vivid semblance of reality.

Mrs. Harding, the handsome widow whose acquaintance Sir Jasper and his daughter had made in the Kursaal at Homburg, arrived at Scarsdale on the day mentioned in her letter, with a paraphernalia that augured a long visit. One of the Abbey carriages attended the lady's coming, and conveyed her from the station. Sir Jasper met her at the great entrance, and conducted her to the amber drawing-room, where Marcia was sitting before the piano playing softly to herself in the dusk.

"My dear Miss Denison,—dear Sir Jasper,—this is so kind of you!" exclaimed the lady, though the kindness of her host and hostess had been somewhat of a negative order, and had consisted chiefly in their allowing her to take advantage of a half-forgotten invitation; "and what an exquisite place you have here! I am charmed with everything. Those dear stately oaks, even in winter, how grand and noble they look! I had imagined Scarsdale Abbey *almost* a royal residence, but *not* such a palace as it really is. Your pictures, even in this firelight, I see are delicious. That's an Etty in the corner, there,—yes, I'm sure it is; and there's my old friend Mulready above that ebony cabinet. But, dear Sir Jasper, dear Miss Denison, how well you are both looking! I can see that even in *this* uncertain light," exclaimed the widow, suddenly remembering that her friends who were both standing with their backs to the low fire, might have been galvanised corpses, and she none the wiser.

"You must be tired, after travelling in this abominable

weather," said Sir Jasper, suppressing a yawn. "Shall Marcia show you your rooms? I suppose they have told your maid where she is to carry all those fragile bonnet-boxes and precious morocco bags, which a well-trained Abigail never intrusts to the rough grasp of the ruder sex."

"Dear Sir Jasper," exclaimed Mrs. Harding, revealing a set of teeth that glittered in the dim firelight, "I have no maid. I am quite a woman of the world, and have dispensed with that perpetual encumbrance, a confidential maid, ever since I have been old enough to travel without the protection of a female companion. I am one of the most self-reliant creatures that ever lived; and my habits could be scarcely more simple if I were compelled to exist upon the pension of a captain's widow, instead of enjoying the very comfortable fortune left me by my dear husband. But *you* will not be surprised at this, Miss Denison; for I know how independent you are in your habits."

"My daughter has a little maid who has been her *protégée* ever since she was old enough to patronise anything, and whom she treats very much as other young ladies treat their lap-dogs. However, I am sure you are tired," exclaimed Sir Jasper, struggling politely with another yawn, "and Marcia shall show you your rooms."

The widow protested against her dear Miss Denison's taking so much trouble; but Marcia was politely decided, and led the way to a handsome suite of rooms at the head of the grand staircase; spacious chambers, with dark crimson draperies, and massive furniture that loomed duskily in the warm glow of noble fires. The wax-candles burning on a dressing-table made only a spot of brightness in the large bed-chamber.

"What delicious rooms!" cried the widow, peering about her in the firelight; "and how happy I mean to be in them! Dear Miss Denison, I can scarcely express to you how pleased I am to see you once more. We were so happy together at Homburg, were we not, dear? And to spend a real old English Christmas with you in this noble old Abbey, which seems positively brimful of romance and mystery! Oh, how delightful it will be! And you really have chosen these rooms for me,—these bright glowing rooms, which look like perfect temples of comfort and luxury. I *must* kiss you once more, you dear, kind, thoughtful darling."

Mrs. Harding pounced upon Marcia, and embraced her with effusion. Miss Denison received the embrace with a quiet gentleness. She did not like Mrs. Harding, but she felt that she had no justification for disliking her, and she was very anxious to conquer that unjustifiable sentiment. That

poet was only a benighted heathen from whose verses we derive our familiar rhyme about Dr. Fell ; and our Christian creed cannot tolerate any such thing as an unreasoning antipathy to a fellow-creature.

"And your rooms are near here, I hope? No? I am so sorry for that; I wanted to feel myself always close to you. We must play and sing all our old duets again, dear Miss Denison—and, oh! will you allow me to call you Marcia?" cried the widow, with one of those sudden gushes of emotion which were so frequent in her discourse.

How could Miss Denison reply except in the affirmative?

"Call me whatever you please, I shall be very happy," she murmured, looking down.

The thoughts which the flattering request called up in Marcia Denison's mind were not very pleasant ones. She was thinking how few people had ever called her by her Christian name; and how, since her sister's death, no lips had ever spoken it with any tenderness of expression. Mrs. Harding's gushing friendliness chilled her to the very heart, for it reminded her that there was such a thing as affection, though it never came to her. She felt like a child who, far away from home, responds faintly to the mechanical caresses of her noisy schoolfellows, remembering the mother's soft bosom, the mother's tender voice murmuring low words of love.

"And you will call me Blanche, won't you, Marcia? Marcia! what a beautiful name it is! to me there always seems something regal in the sound of it. And Blanche is a pretty name, *pas vrai, ma bien chérie?*" demanded Mrs. Harding, who, amongst her gushing ways, had the habit of gushing every now and then into a foreign language.

"Yes, it is a very pretty name," replied Miss Denison, wondering how she should ever bring herself to address this gorgeous widow by so girlish and sentimental an appellation; and then, as Mrs. Harding threw up the lid of a gigantic leather trunk, in which bright-coloured silk dresses and festal decorations of an alarming character were visible, Marcia added, "I fear you will find our house a very dull one. You know that papa has quite secluded himself from general society since my poor sister's death. It is an understood thing in the county that we neither visit nor receive visits; and with the exception of one neighbour and friend who comes to us in the most unceremonious manner, I doubt if you will see any one but ourselves.

"Then, my darling Marcia, how delightful to me to feel that I am received where others, doubtless infinitely more deserving, are excluded! At Homburg, where you and your dear papa lived so very quietly, I was inexpressibly flattered

by the manner in which he admitted me to his confidence. I shall always love *Galignani*; for, if you remember, dear Marcia, our acquaintance arose out of the absurdly trivial accident of your papa offering me that journal in the reading-room; and then he made some little remark about the place and the people, and then in the next few minutes we seemed quite old friends. And on the following day he introduced me to *you*, darling; and I felt at once that I had found a congenial spirit. Oh, in this weary waste of life," cried Mrs. Harding with another gush, "what is there so precious as a congenial spirit?"

This was one of those questions which the heroine in a melodrama generally addresses to the chandelier, and which are not supposed to require any special answer.

"Can my little Dorothy be of any use to you?" inquired Marcia. "She is by no means an accomplished maid, but she is very neat and quick in all she does, and I think you would find her intelligent. Shall I send her?"

"No, darling—thanks. I am so extremely independent, and I really have been so long accustomed to do everything for myself, that I should be a little bored by the assistance of a maid."

This was quite true. In these days, in which Israelitish practitioners undertake to render beauty eternal,—while *ciderant* Abigails advertise their readiness to impart the last method of "making-up the face and eyes" for the small consideration of a few postage-stamps,—there are secrets in some toilettes which will not bear the searching eye of an attendant.

Mrs. Harding was a very handsome woman of the florid order; but she was of an age which the tongue of detraction alluded to vaguely as the wrong side of forty; while even friendship unwillingly confessed that her eight-and-thirtieth birthday was a stage upon the highway of life which lay behind this gorgeous widow. How much of that massive coil of raven tresses which adorned the back of her well-shaped head was an integral part of the head it decorated,—how much of that delicate bloom upon her plump oval cheek owed its rosy freshness to the pencil of Nature,—how far the fruity crimson of the pouting lips took its colour from the warm life-blood beneath the dewy surface, were so many mysteries which Mrs. Harding, in her most gushing moments, had contrived to keep safely locked in her own breast.

"What do I care how the woman obtains her beauty, provided she is beautiful?" said Sir Jasper, discussing this subject, after an evening spent in the widow's society. "Shall I bother myself, when I look at one of Etty's nymphs, about

the colours the artist has employed in creating her? What do I care how much vermilion or what artful glaze of *jaune de Mars* has been necessary to warm those glowing limbs into life and loveliness?—or whether the loose rain of rippling hair that veils my goddess owes its golden glory to yellow ochre or to Naples yellow? What do I want to know, except that she is there, and it is my business to admire her? My daughter, who kisses me when she bids me good-night, must have no paint upon *her* lips, for she is a part of myself, and I should hold myself dishonoured by any falsehood of hers. But let my lovely visitor resort to what arts she pleases in the manufacture of her loveliness. I applaud her ingenuity, and I thank her for taking so much trouble in order to present a beautiful object for my contemplation."

When the second dinner-bell rang, Mrs. Harding presented herself in the drawing-room, gorgeous in dark-green *moiré-antique*, old point-lace, and ornaments of *cabochon emeralds* set in filigree gold. Very handsome white shoulders glimmered under the pelerine of old point; a throat that a sculptor would have been glad to model was encircled by the necklet of filigree gold. No one could have denied the widow's claim to be considered a very magnificent woman, even though a few subtle artifices might have been employed to enhance her splendour. She was like one of those fatal lies which are so difficult of disproof—a falsehood with some foundation of truth. An ugly woman, who patches up her ugliness with simulated roses and lilies, and luxuriant tresses imported from Germany, draws down upon herself shame and confusion. But a beautiful woman, whose artistic fingers do sturdy battle with the hand of Time, is generally forgiven by that nobler half of the creation for whose pleasure she clings so desperately to her waning charms. The rigid simplicity of Marcia Denison's brown-silk dress and smoothly-banded hair served as a kind of foil for the widow's gorgeous demi-toilette and elaborate *chevelure*. But Mrs. Harding seemed to have no idea that she had taken unnecessary trouble to make herself beautiful; and yet she was not a woman likely to willingly waste any effort. To-night she seemed only bent upon making herself agreeable; and yet she was not a woman to make herself agreeable without a motive.

Sir Jasper Denison, looking at this splendid creature lazily through half-closed eyelids, while she gave him a vivacious account of her journey from Paris to Roxborough, with delightful touches of local colouring, and an almost epigrammatic piquancy of expression,—Sir Jasper, looking at her as he might have contemplated one of his Ettys, or a pretty actress at the *Bouffes Parisiennes*, wondered whether she had any motive for coming

to Scarsdale. "I hope she hasn't," he thought; "anything of that kind would be such a terrible waste of trouble. These florid widows are generally supposed to be so many Macchiavellis in moiré-antique; but I think this one has a perceptive ridge which will save her from any absurd mistake about me. From what I see in the newspapers, I imagine that the honourable method by which the women of the present day endeavour to lay up a provision for their old age is by beguiling some infatuated bachelor into the utterance of sentiments which are as false as the charms that inspire them, and then bringing an action for breach of promise against the recusant admirer. But I think a man must say something, or write something, or commit some small overt act of idiocy before the action can lie, however ready the lady's witnesses may be to do so; and in that case I am quite safe, and may admire our charming widow at my ease. She is certainly very handsome; one of Giorgione's Madonnas who has seen the world, and is just a trifle *passée*."

Sir Jasper had put on a dress-coat in honour of his visitor, and the holland draperies had disappeared from the amber drawing-room. The dinner was simple, but in perfect taste; and Mrs. Harding, who was essentially epicurean, enjoyed herself prodigiously, and brightened more and more under the influence of white Hermitage, sparkling Burgundy, and Curaçoa. The dark eyes flashed with bewitching vivacity as the widow entertained her quiet companions with anecdotes about the people she had met in Paris, and deliciously-spiteful epigrams which had obtained reputation for the wits of the Faubourg St. Honoré. Sir Jasper was delighted; and Marcia was amused by a style of conversation which was so entirely foreign to her own idea of what conversation should be, and which was yet so skilfully managed as never to offend even the refined taste of a well-bred English woman. Mrs. Harding's first evening at Scarsdale passed very pleasantly. She played *ecarté* with the Baronet, and sang half-a-dozen duets with Marcia, whose rich contralto harmonised delightfully with the widow's mezzo-soprano; and it was nearly midnight when she wished the Baronet good-night, and went up the broad staircase with her arm affectionately encircling Marcia's waist.

She stopped on the threshold of her door to indulge in a final gush. "In the whole course of my life, dear, which has been a very varied one, I never enjoyed an evening as I have enjoyed to-night. How is it, and why is it, Marcia darling? Need I ask such a question? What delight in all this world is as pure as that which we derive from the society of friends—friends whose sincerity we instinctively trust in; whose friendship is *not* a name, and does *not* follow wealth or fame, or leave

the wretch to——My sweet Marcia, what a lovely cameo! I think I never saw a more exquisite head—the gift of your papa, I know; I recognise his artistic taste, his warm appreciation of the beautiful! Oh, WHAT a papa he is!” exclaimed Mrs. Harding, enthusiastically squeezing Marcia’s hand, and steering that young lady’s candle a little further from her own eyebrows, which were very artistic, but not produced with a view to the immediate proximity of a strong light. “WHAT a papa! so versatile, so deeply read, so fascinating! Oh, what a happy girl you ought to be, dear love, with such a papa!”

Marcia’s eyelids drooped under her smiling friend’s gaze. These charming women of the feline tribe are so apt to forget that the gentlest touch of a velvet paw may be unpleasant when it lights upon a gaping wound.

“My father has not even yet recovered the shock of my sister’s death,” Marcia said gravely; “and I can never be to him what she was. I love him very dearly, but——”

The words died away upon her lips. No; not to this smiling widow, with the rosy mouth, which it was so difficult to believe in, morally or, physically—not to Blanche Harding could Marcia Denison reveal the one great sorrow of her life. But she received her guest’s final embrace and a little shower of pouncing kisses very submissively, and found herself involuntarily rubbing her forehead, as she went along the corridor leading to her own room, with a vague notion that the rosy lips had stained it.

CHAPTER X.

MRS. HARDING SEES A FAMILIAR FACE.

THE next day was bright and pleasant—a real winter’s day, with a cold frosty wind blowing amongst the blackening fern, and crisping the waters of all the ponds in Scarsdale wood, whereby hope was kindled in the bosoms of enthusiastic skaters; while a sullen despair came down upon hard-riding gentlemen and their retainers; and in half-a-dozen stable-yards in the county might have been seen the living representation of Sir Edwin Landseer’s delicious picture.

“There will be a thaw to-morrow,” said Sir Jasper, as he cut open the last number of the *Revue des Deux Mondes* by the

great fire in his library. "There inevitably is muddy sloppiness and drizzling rain on Christmas-day; as if the rational laws of a rational universe set themselves against the illustrated-newspaper proprietors and popular humorists' scorbutic ideal of jolly King Christmas, with a crown of holly, and an impossibly-gigantic punch-bowl emitting incredible blue-and-yellow blazes. Where are the people who keep the ideal Christmas? Has any one ever seen them, or dined with them, or sat in their family circle after dinner, listening to their ghost-stories, or skirmished with their pretty girls under their mistletoe, or worshipped in their highly-varnished village-church, or shivered in their incredibly snowy streets? Has any one ever met the lawyer who can relate three pages and a half about a singular client, who once came to him on a foggy night, when the boys were playing hide-and-seek in the dusky corners of the inns-of-court; or the elderly maiden lady who, at five minutes' notice, will give you a concise but sentimental account of her dead sister, whose plighted lover was lost on a moor one Christmas-day just seven-and-thirty years ago, and who never smiled again, poor darling, till the very smile she wore, as she stood in the old oriel-window waiting for *him* that Christmas-day, came back to her face as she lay in her coffin, never to leave it more; or the young medical student, who can't tell you any story of his own but fortunately happens to carry about him the manuscript of a diary kept by a fellow-student, who died of delirium tremens? I suppose there are such people; and very agreeable they must be; but one doesn't meet them. I should think now, if there ever was any one sufficiently eloquent to give a synopsis of a three-volume novel in three pages and a half of very good English at a minute's warning, you, Mrs. Harding, might be that accomplished *improvisatore*. I dare say that you will be able to tell us some mysterious and romantic story about a dead sister to-morrow evening, as we sit by the fire, or as we *should* sit by the fire, if Christmas-day were not inevitably warm and muggy."

Have you ever seen the deadly pallor of the natural complexion revealing itself under an artificial bloom? It is not a pleasant sight; and Sir Jasper almost shuddered as he saw the sudden change upon Mrs. Harding's face.

"Pray forgive me!" he said gently. "I see that I have touched upon a sensitive chord. You have lost a sister very dear to you."

"Yes," Mrs. Harding replied, quite calmly. "My sister died only last year. I was in mourning for her when I first met you."

The natural warmth had come back to her face. Whatever

shock Sir Jasper's random words had inflicted upon her had passed, and left her as self-possessed as usual.

Marcia took her guest for a drive after an early luncheon. It was dusk when the carriage drove into Castleford, after a long round in the country lanes and by-roads. The lamps were lighted in the shops, but there was still a cold yellow glimmer in the west, and a grey light in the wintry sky. By this light Mrs. Harding saw the faces of a couple of young men who were lounging in the doorway of a tobacconist's shop, over which the illuminated windows of a billiard-room looked pale in the expiring daylight. One of the men was Gervoise Catheron, and the other was an ensign in an infantry regiment quartered in Castleford barracks.

The widow turned her head to look at these men, and turned again, and lifted her veil on the second occasion, as if anxious to see them more distinctly, as Miss Denison's barouche drove slowly along the High Street.

Marcia had some shopping to do in Castleford; and the coachman drew up his horses presently before a haberdasher's shop some two or three hundred yards from the billiard-room.

"I will be as quick as possible in making my purchases," Miss Denison said, as she prepared to alight. "Will you come into the shop, or sit in the carriage? Godwin can drive up and down the street, if you find it cold standing still."

"Thanks, dear; no," answered Mrs. Harding, rather hurriedly. "I will get out and go back to a stationer's I saw a few doors from here. I forgot all about stationery when I was making my purchases in town. You'll wait for me, won't you, love, if I should be a little longer than you?"

She alighted immediately after Marcia, and hurried away in the dusk. But the splendid widow did not enter the shop of the chief stationer of Castleford. She passed his door, and went straight to the tobacconist's, on whose threshold the young ensign and the sub-lieutenant of marines were still lounging in listless attitudes, smoking the tobacconist's finest Cabanas, and drawling drowsy abuse of some "fellow" who had appointed to meet them there, and who was behind his time.

As Mrs. Harding approached this door, she slackened her footsteps all at once, and walked slowly by, with her veil thrown back and her face turned towards the gas-lighted window. She was scarcely half a dozen yards from the shop, when Gervoise Catheron muttered some hurried excuse to his companion, and darted after her.

"Good God!" murmured the ensign, lifting his pale eyebrows and yawning dismally, "I really think everybody has gone mad this afternoon." He prepared himself a fresh cigar, in a dreadfully boa-constrictor-like manner, and then

disappeared in the passage over whose threshold shone the mystic word "Billiards."

Gervoise Catheron overtook the widow just as she turned into a dingy little lane of gloomy houses, leading towards the swampy shores of the Merdrid.

"Beauty!" he exclaimed, in a tone that was very subdued, and yet very energetic, "what on earth is the meaning of your turning up in this unexpected manner in High Street, Castleford? I should as soon have thought of meeting the pontiff Pio Nono parading past Hodgson's shop as you. I thought it was an understood thing you did *not* come to England, Beauty?"

Mrs. Harding had lowered her veil by this time. She turned upon the sub-lieutenant with a frown whose darkness he did not see.

"Why do you call me by that absurd name?" she asked angrily. "Do you want to remind me that I was a child once, and had a foolish mother and father, whose affection proved itself by giving their children sentimental pet-names, and letting them grow up as they pleased, or as they could? for it would have been very difficult to grow into anything good in *our* house. Call me Blanche. I have used my second name lately, for I hate every other by which I was ever called."

Gervoise Catheron did not answer for some moments; and then it seemed as if he had not heard, or at any rate had not heeded, Mrs. Harding's last words.

"Beauty," he said, after a pause, "you have grown as hard as your sister."

"Was I ever different from her?"

"Yes," he answered sadly, "I think you were once."

There was another pause, and then the sub-lieutenant said, in an altered tone, "But, for goodness' sake, Bean—well, Blanche, if you like,—God knows there's not so much childishness about us now, that we must needs call ourselves by childish names!—how is it that you drop out of the skies into High Street, Castleford? I thought you had promised to live out of England."

"What does that matter to you?"

"Very little, certainly. Only when you promise a fellow to do such and such a thing, and a fellow, on that consideration, acts very liberally,—and there's no denying that he has acted very liberally, Bean—oh, hang it all! Blanche, if you like it better,—though I can't say that *I* have benefited much by his liberality,—I think the least you can do is to keep your promise. However, as you remark, or as you were about to remark, I can see, by that jerk of your bonnet, that's no affair of mine. I was sorry to hear of your sister's death, Blanche;

though I can't say she was ever particularly good to me—ah, I see by that other jerk of your bonnet, you think that's unfeeling; but a fellow's mind is likely to be degraded when the best thing a fellow's friends can do for him is to put him into a service in which a man calls himself a soldier, but takes his orders from the Admiralty, and lives amongst sailors without claiming fellowship with them. You've left off your mourning, I perceive. I haven't. I gave a shilling for a hatband the day I heard of her death; and I've worn it ever since! and deuced shabby both the band and the hat are by this time."

"Are you in difficulties, Gervoise?" asked the widow, when they had walked to the end of the lane, and had turned to go back again.

"Of course I am in difficulties. Was I ever out of them?" cried the sub-lieutenant with easy frankness; "difficulty is my normal state, and has been ever since I had threepence a week for pocket-money at a preparatory school, and spent sixpence. I did my first bill—on the cover of my copybook—before my eleventh birthday, and have been doing bills, and occasionally the bill discounters, ever since. And I really think, Beauty,—now don't jerk your bonnet, though I acknowledge that it does sound rather as if you were a King Charles spaniel with apoplectic eyeballs and a crumpled nose,—I really think, Blanche, that after a separation of ten years—and, upon my honour you don't look as if it had been more than five—the least you could do would be to offer me a modest tender, or, putting it more clearly, a ten-pound note."

"Gervoise!" exclaimed the widow reproachfully, "who would believe that you belong to one of the oldest families in Buckinghamshire?"

"Ah, who indeed? And in the marines! But I really shall be very grateful for that tender. Suppose you give me your purse off hand, as they do on the stage," said Mr. Catherton, as the widow produced her portemonnaie.

But Mrs. Harding was not a benefactress of the order so common in melodrama; she opened the portemonnaie, and deliberately counted four sovereigns, which she handed to the lieutenant.

"That's all I can do for you to-night, Gervoise," she said; "and now I must wish you good-night, and hurry back to a friend whom I left waiting for me in the High Street."

She was walking very fast as she spoke.

"But tell me where you are staying."

"I can't stop to do that now. Give me your address, and I will write to you. But be quick; I must get back to my friend."

"But who *is* your friend?" asked Mr. Catheron, fumbling in his waistcoat-pocket, and producing a crumpled envelope.

The widow snatched it from him impatiently. They were at the corner of the lane by this time.

"Don't follow me a step farther; and don't on any account recognise me if you meet me with any one. I'll write to you in a day or two."

She turned into the High Street, and hurried away ere her companion could attempt to detain her. The lieutenant stood for a few minutes staring absently after her, and then strolled slowly towards the tobacconist's, with his hands in his pockets, and the sovereigns jingling as he walked. It was to be observed that in the whole course of this conversation the widow had not indulged in any of those little outbursts of emotion so common in her conversation. There were evidently occasions upon which the enthusiastic Mrs. Harding did *not* gush.

CHAPTER XL.

WHY DID SHE DO IT?

MR. PAUNCEFORT'S servant made his appearance at the Abbey early in the afternoon of the 24th, and joined a social tea-drinking party in the housekeeper's room, after arranging his master's things in the pretty blue bed-chamber. But George Pouncefort himself strolled across the park in the early dusk, and was ushered into Sir Jasper's den just as that gentleman had composed himself for his before-dinner nap.

The Baronet roused himself with an exclamation of pleasure, and shook hands very heartily with his visitor.

"I am flattered by this fulfilment of your promise, my dear Pouncefort," he said; "as I began to think you were revenging yourself upon us for the dulness of our house, and had cut us dead. You will be rewarded by finding some improvement in the state of affairs, in the shape of a handsome widow, who has come all the way from Homburg—no, her last location was a villa at Passy, by the way—to enliven us with her vivacity. Such inexhaustible animation!—the sort of woman one remembers in half a dozen comedies of the hoop-and-powder school. The woman who taps you playfully with her fan, and vows you're vastly agreeable. A charming creature to flirt with, if you know how to keep yourself on the safe side; but a creature who would have an offer of marriage and a

princely settlement out of a weak-minded man before he knew where he was. However, after enjoying the society of the lions on the banks of the Niger, and stalking crocodiles on the rushy shores of the Nile, I should think you must be a match for a widow."

"I am not afraid of any peril from the lady's fascinations, however charming she may be," answered Mr. Pauncefort, with a grave smile. "But I have such a misanthropical aversion to the faces of strangers, that I am really inclined to throw myself upon your mercy, Sir Jasper, and entreat your permission to defer my visit until after your fascinating guest has departed. I was so happy here in the autumn; happier than I can possibly be when the quiet spell that hangs about this heart is broken by the presence of a stranger."

He spoke almost sadly, and he looked round the dusky room with a pensive tenderness in his dark eyes.

"I was so very happy here," he repeated in an undertone, "so entirely happy."

Sir Jasper turned upon his tenant with an impatient gesture.

"*Histoire de bêtise!* my dear Mr. Pauncefort," he cried, "do you mean to tell me that you intend to run away from my house because I happen to be encumbered by a futile widow, picked up at Homburg? If there is such a thing in this world as friendship, I really think the sentiment which I entertain for you must be that thing. Don't fling me back upon the frivolous society of an over-dressed widow. Your companionship has done more towards exorcising the dismal phantoms of the past than I thought was within the power of mortal man to do. Spend to-morrow with us; and if, when to-morrow night comes, you find you have been bored intolerably, turn your back upon us the following morning."

"You are very good, Sir Jasper. Your friendship flatters as much as it pleases me. I should like to stop. The very atmosphere of this room has almost a magical effect upon me, for in this room I beheld the first glimpse of a home after fifteen years of homelessness; it has been to me what the first dim blue line of an English shore must be to the wanderer who has spent half a life-time at the antipodes. Yes, I should so much like to stop. But, to be frank with you, I have not only a dislike to meeting strangers, I have something more than that:—I have something that amounts to an actual terror of meeting any one in the remotest degree associated with my past life. Fifteen years ago I lived in London, and knew a great many people; and one of my reasons for avoiding all society is my horror of meeting any of those old acquaintances."

Such a speech as this, from a man whose past was entirely unknown to his host, might have awakened vague fears in the breast of a suspicious person. But Sir Jasper was neither suspicious nor inquisitive; he had none of those low vices which inflict infinite trouble upon their victims; his vices and his virtues were alike of a negative order. Dr. Johnson declared the belief in a future existence to be the only thing which hinders a man from cutting his neighbour's throat, for the sake of filling his own pocket. But there are many reasons which would have hindered Sir Jasper Denison from improving his own fortunes by the assassination of his fellow-men, over and above acid Beauclerk's sensible argument, that the man who has no faith in the immortality of the soul may have a very implicit belief in the existence of the hangman. Murder, however neatly it may be executed, is a crime attended with unutterable inconvenience. A combination of circumstances might have arisen under which it would have been possible for Sir Jasper to look on and see a murder committed; but under no possible phase of events could the Baronet have done the deed. He had been a disciple of Voltaire ever since his boyhood; he had looked up at the stars, and admired them with the sensuous admiration of a Sardanapalus, and had rarely lost an opportunity of insulting their mighty Creator by some covert sneer; but he had never in all his life done anything particularly wicked, chiefly because he knew very well that every kind of sin is so apt to entail trouble and vexation upon the sinner.

"I can understand your desire to turn your back upon the past," he said; "but unless you know this Mrs. Harding, I don't see how her presence here can affect you."

"Harding?" repeated George Pauncefort. "No. It's a common name enough; but I don't think I ever knew any one of the name of Harding."

"Very well, then; of course in that case you will stop."

"Do you really wish me to do so?"

"With all my heart."

"And I too, Mr. Pauncefort," said a low gentle voice; and, looking up with a start, Sir Jasper's tenant saw Marcia Denison standing on the threshold of the door. He hurried across the room to meet her as she advanced towards him. She gave him her hand, and, looking at her in the firelight, he thought that her pale beauty was something akin to the white loveliness of the lilies he had seen in that wondrous region between the Tigris and the Euphrates, which travellers fondly believe in as the original Eden.

"I hope you are not going to run away from us, Mr. Pauncefort," said Marcia. "I am sure you would not wish to

do so if you knew how much papa and I have looked forward to your promised visit."

"Ah," thought Sir Jasper's tenant, "she would scarcely say that if she did not think me old enough to be her grandfather."

"You will find Mrs. Harding a very agreeable person," continued Miss Denison; "and if you are fond of music, as I have no doubt you are, we shall be able to entertain you——"

"Oh," said Mr. Pauncefort, "Mrs. Harding is musical then?"

"Yes; she is an accomplished musician, and has a very fine voice. Why you look almost as if that were an objection! Did Diogenes object to music?"

"Perhaps Diogenes had no unpleasant associations connected with it, Miss Denison. For myself, I am very fond of music; but there is a certain kind of pianoforte music whose sound brings back to me the dreariest part of my life. I once knew a lady who wore a blue dress on the night her husband was brought home to her killed by a fall from his horse. She could never endure the sight of that colour afterwards, though she married again, and was the happy mother of beautiful children. However, I am not quite so sensitive as that lady, and I shall be very glad to hear as much music as ever you and your guest will give me."

"Will you come and be introduced to her? I have just left her and I must return immediately. We have both of us been busy in our rooms all day, and I really have scarcely seen her since breakfast."

"I shall be very happy to come with you."

"And you will take a nap, I suppose, papa, before you dress?"

"Dress for dinner!" cried Sir Jasper. "How inscrutable are the formulas of civilisation! My velvet dressing-gown is really a handsome and not altogether unpicturesque garment, with easy flowing lines, and an agreeable variety of light and shadow; while my swallow-tail coat, on the other hand, is shabby, old-fashioned, and ungraceful: and yet, if I were to dine in my dressing-gown, the widow would consider herself an injured woman. *Au revoir*, my dear Pauncefort! Go and be fascinated, while I take my restorative nap, and refit my exhausted intellect for an argumentative evening."

The lamps had not yet been carried into the amber drawing-room when Marcia and Mr. Pauncefort entered the apartment. No one but a barbarian is ever in any hurry to put an end to a winter twilight and the flickering glow of a fire in a

brightly-furnished room. Mrs. Harding was standing in one of the windows, with her elbow resting on the elaborate scroll-work of a high-backed chair, and her face towards the dusky landscape.

She turned her head as Marcia and her companion entered, but still stood in the deep embrasure of the window, half-hidden by the shadow of voluminous curtains.

Sir Jasper's tenant saw only the outline of a very perfect figure, and the warm reddish hue of a violet-silk dress, touched here and there by the firelight.

"Blanche," said Marcia, "I have brought you Mr. Pauncefort, the owner of that romantic little Hermitage which you so much admired yesterday, as we drove through the wood."

"Then I am sure I shall be delighted to see him!" cried the widow: "for no one but a man with the eye of a painter and the soul of a poet would be likely to select such a sweet spot. I must claim a kindred spirit, and shake hands with your friend on the strength of our sympathy, Marcia."

That had been a dark brooding face which had looked out at the blackening winter sky; but Blanche Harding spoke in her sprightliest manner, as she came smiling out of the shadows, and advanced with outstretched hand towards Miss Denison's companion. There was a faint flavour of patronage in the sweetness of her tone. The widow was a woman of the world, and had concluded that a man who would consent to bury himself in the sombre recesses of Seardsdale wood must have not only the soul of a poet and the eye of the painter, but the limited income of a man who finds himself unable to live any where else.

She came smiling out of the darkness, her silken draperies trailing after her, deeply purple in the shadow, brightly red in the light, like the convolutions of some beautiful serpent; but as she stood a little way from Sir Jasper's tenant, with her hand outstretched, waiting for him to take it, and her handsome head uplifted with a kind of regal graciousness, the capricious firelight—which played all manner of practical jokes with the pictures on the walls, making Etty's drawing absurd, and Turner's colouring ridiculous—leapt into sudden brightness, and flickered on George Pauncefort's face.

Blanche Harding's extended hand dropped heavily upon a little table, a tiny gilded table, loaded with fragile toys, which fell crashing down beneath the weight of that falling hand. Sir Jasper's tenant stood unmoved as a statue, looking the widow full in the face. Marcia Denison glanced amazedly from one to the other. Was this a recognition—a surprise—or what?

"There never was anything so preposterous as the delusion created by the light of a wood-fire," cried Mrs. Harding, turning to Marcia. "Mr. Pauncefort's face just this moment looked like the face of a man who died ten years ago; and yet I dare say, when the lamps are brought in, I shall find no resemblance between your papa's friend and the person of whom he so terribly reminded me."

The widow shuddered—a coquettish little shudder, which brought her sloping shoulders into play—and then breathed a faint languishing sigh, expressive of intense relief.

"Oh, here are the lamps; and I see that I was quite right—Mr. Pauncefort is not an atom like the poor dead person. Oh, my dear Marcia, I really fear I have broken some of your pretty Dresden—that darling little cup with the cover—is the cover all right?—yes, it really has escaped, love! I am so glad, it's such a sweet colour—Augustus Rex, I know, and not the trumpery crossed-dagger-marked modern stuff that one can buy wholesale any where. I am such a silly, sensitive creature," exclaimed the widow, who was kneeling on the ground, examining one of the fallen cups and saucers. "And there are memories which—no, I will *not* be sentimental; and I will go and dress for dinner."

She rose from her knees, placed the little cup and saucer gently amongst its kindred cups and saucers, made a graceful little curtsy, half to Miss Denison, half to Mr. Pauncefort, and left the room with a noiseless gliding step, and the violet silken drapery winding after her, always more or less serpentine in its trailing splendour.

"Are you very intimate with Mrs. Harding?" George Pauncefort asked presently, as Marcia seated herself by a table on which the servant had placed a shaded reading-lamp.

"Oh, no; I can scarcely say I am intimate with her. I never saw her until last year, at Homburg. Papa likes her very much."

"And do *you* like her, Miss Denison?"

"I think her very clever—and very agreeable."

"Exactly. And that reply means that you do **not** like her?"

"Really, Mr. Pauncefort, I don't think you have any right to ask me such a question, or to jump at any conclusion upon such a point! I am not a person to make sudden friendships, and I have known Mrs. Harding a very short time; but she is my guest, and I should think that fact in itself should preclude the possibility of any question as to my liking for her."

"Forgive me, if I have violated the sanctity of the bread and salt."

There was a long pause, during which Mr. Pauncefort

walked up and down the room, while Marcia strung some beads upon a piece of silk ; and then he made some commonplace remark, from which they drifted into conversation : but there was a tone of restraint in their conversation ; it was not quite the old easy talk with which they had beguiled so many hours in the autumn that was past.

Marcia wondered why this was ; and found herself wondering whether Mrs. Harding's explanation of her sudden emotion was quite a truthful one ; or whether these two people might not have known and quarrelled with each other in some remote period of their existences, and parted in anger years ago, to meet accidentally to-night, with conventional smiles on their faces, and a stranger looking on at the meeting.

Sir Jasper appeared presently, looking unutterably patrician, in very shabby evening-dress ; and shortly afterwards Mrs. Harding came rustling into the room in the green moiré-antique and the *cabochon* emeralds.

Her shoulders were shrouded by the point-lace pelerine ; but her plump arms were bare from the elbows downwards, and midway between the elbow and the wrist of the left arm she wore a broad band of black velvet, clasped so tightly as almost to cut the soft white flesh.

Sir Jasper's tenant only looked at her once as she stood before him in the full light of the lamps, and then his glance went straight to the velvet bracelet on her left arm.

It was not a pleasant evening. The dinner and the wines were perfection ; but there is a heaviness of spirit which all the vintages of the *Côte-d'Or* are powerless to dispel. To-night a leaden dulness oppressed somebody in that small circle, and communicated itself by some subtle magnetism to everybody else. Mrs. Harding played *écarté* with the Baronet, and twice forgot to mark the king. She sang with Marcia ; but she made a piteous fiasco of the time in the quick movement of a duet from *Norma*. There was something wrong. Sir Jasper yawned in his tenant's face, and then apologised profusely for his own dulness.

"We are four very intellectual people, but we are not proof against the influence of the festive season," said the Baronet. "The twenty-fourth of December is too much for us. The people, the representative merry-makers, are hard at it by this time,—slapping one another upon the back, and boisterously patching up old quarrels and forgetting old grievances, and putting themselves into unpleasant perspirations with hot spiced drinks, and letting bygones be bygones in the most vulgar and ungrammatical manner. Peace on earth and goodwill to men, says the hymn which the charity-children will sing—lamentably flat, by-the bye—to-morrow : well, it's a

pretty idea, and why should we quarrel with it? Peace upon earth and goodwill amongst men, say I. Marcia, we seem all of us a cup too low to-night. Ring the bell, my dear, and order Old Oliver's tankard to be filled with mulled claret,—the Lafitte with the black seal. It's close upon twelve o'clock; and, by all that is jovial, we'll keep Christmas like the people in the illustrated newspapers, and our toast shall be, Peace and goodwill."

"Dear Sir Jasper, what a charming idea! and how delighted I should be to help you in carrying it out!" exclaimed Mrs. Harding, rising from before the piano with an air of fatigue; "but I have such a terrible headache that I must really say good-night immediately, or I shall be quite unable to go to church to-morrow morning."

For the second time that night, and only the second time, Mr. Pauncefort looked straight at the widow. His bearded lip stirred a little, as if he would have spoken; but he turned suddenly away, and looked down at the fire, into whose hollow depth he had been staring absently for some time before.

Somehow or other the black-sealed claret was not uncorked that evening; and Sir Jasper lost the opportunity of patronising Christianity.

While the great stable clock was striking twelve, with a ponderous chime that mingled with the voices of some village lads singing a Christmas-carol on the Abbey-terrace, Blanche Harding stood before the fire in her room, loosely wrapped in a dressing-gown, one sleeve of which was rolled up to her shoulder, and securely pinned there. It was the left arm which was thus bared—a plump white arm, without spot or blemish. The widow's face wore a strange expression, almost an expression of pain; and yet she was only staring at the fire, into the very heart of which she had thrust the point of the poker.

Presently, shuddering from head to foot, she knelt upon the hearth-rug, and drew the poker from the burning coals. Her face was horribly distorted as she grasped the centre of this poker, and laid the red-hot point of it across her arm, midway between the wrist and the elbow, exactly where she had clasped the velvet bracelet when she dressed for dinner that evening.

CHAPTER XII.

DRIVEN AWAY.

SIR JASPER'S tenant did not appear in the breakfast-room on Christmas morning. His man brought a message of apology to the Baronet—a vague message, alleging no particular reason for his master's absence; but the languid chieftain of Scarsdale allowed perfect liberty to his guests, and was not given to be curious as to their motives for doing this or that.

The sparkling widow was not quite so brilliant as usual this morning. A delicate pallor, just a little chalky in a strong east light, had superseded the rich bloom which was wont to glow upon her plump cheeks. The brightness of her eyes was a trifle feverish, and the red lips had a dry look, and quivered nervously every now and then.

Sir Jasper, looking at her as he might have looked at one of his pictures whose colour showed symptoms of decay, could not refrain from a languid speculation regarding his guest's altered looks.

"Those abominable carol-singers kept you awake half the night, I dare say," he murmured compassionately. "Imagine the utter idiotey of half-a-dozen clodhoppers, who howl, 'God bless you, merry gentlemen, let nothing you dismay,' when their own hideous minstrelsy is horrible enough to break the rest of the Seven Sleepers, and dismay the uncultivated ears of an Ojibbeway Indian. You look as if you had been haunted all night by the memory of their howling."

Mrs. Harding smiled a very wan smile.

"You are quite right, Sir Jasper," she said, "as to my sleeplessness, but wrong as regards the cause of it. I would have forgiven the carol-singers; indeed I love to hear those dear old verses sung under the windows of such a house as this; I am carried back to the days of the cavaliers, by the sound of that quaint invocation, and almost expect to awake in one of Mr. Horsley's interiors. No, I would have forgiven the villagers on the terrace for being a little undecided as to what key they should sing in, and should have gone to sleep to dream about some phantom lady in a brocaded sacque, I dare say, if it had not been for a very severe attack of my old enemy *tic*, which kept me tossing about in agony all the night; and I really feel so miserably languid and drowsy this morning, that I must excuse myself from attending your darling

little village church, whose steeple I saw from my window peeping out of a break in the leafless woodland, just like some delicious little 'bit' by Mr. Creswick. So, with your permission, dear Marcia, I shall read the Christmas service in my own room, or in one of your easy-chairs by the drawing-room fire."

The Baronet and his daughter were politely concerned about their guest's neuralgic affection.

"I hope the woman is not going to inflict her illnesses upon us," thought Sir Jasper, after murmuring something that was indistinctly compassionate and befitting the occasion; "a lively widow is one thing, but a neuralgic widow is another. There's a want of tone about her left cheek this morning, and the right eyebrow is decidedly out of drawing. Her toilet has been by no means conscientious, and I hold myself aggrieved by her careless manipulation. If she wants to make as long a visit as her trunks and bandboxes predicate, she must suppress her neuralgic symptoms, and improve her flesh-tints. I haven't anything on my walls so crude or cold as my visitor's face this morning."

"If you were to take a little chlorodyne," murmured Marcia.

"With a warm glaze over the left cheek," muttered Sir Jasper, absently.

"I will try anything you recommend me, dearest Marcia," answered the widow; "for really I suffered very terribly last night. However, I feel a little better this morning; and I dare say after a few hours' complete repose, I shall be quite myself, and thoroughly able to enjoy a social evening."

Marcia retired to dress for church, and Mrs. Harding left Sir Jasper to his papers by the fire in the breakfast-room. She went to her own room; but instead of lying down, as she had talked of doing, she paced the spacious chamber slowly from end to end, stopping now and then to look at her face in the glass.

It was an anxious brooding face that looked back at her; very haggard in spite of the artificial aid which had been brought to bear to make it beautiful; and the widow looked at it angrily, with a scowl that darkened it, and made it even more haggard.

"What a wretch I look!" she muttered, "and when so much depends on my looking well. What have I in the world but my beauty; and if that fades, what hope is there that I shall ever regain a footing in the only world that is worth living in? Oh, how I hate that other world, that hot-bed of lies and baseness, in which all the women are vulgar

parodies of myself, in which all the men are selfish and false and cruel and cowardly ! It all seemed so bright once, and I thought it something to be a queen in it ; but now I know it, and I know what its highest prizes are worth."

There was a gentle little tap at the door while the widow stood brooding thus before the glass ; and when she opened it, pretty Dorothy stood before her, radiant in the velvet bonnet and blue ribbons, and holding a tiny bottle in her hand.

"Please, Ma'am, Miss Marcia told me to bring you this. The chloride-of-lime, Ma'am, she said. I mean the chori—oh, dear, I am so stupid !—and would you be so kind as to try it, Miss Marcia said."

Dorothy was quite breathless with hurry, for she was speeding off to the lodge, where Mr. Tursgood the bailiff was to pick her up in the chaise-cart which conveyed that gentleman and his young family to the little Roman-Catholic chapel at Castleford. As Dorothy handed the chlorodyne to Sir Jasper's guest, something in the dark eyes of the widow moved her with a strange tremor. Why it was so, she was far too hurried to consider just now. But the image of one person which had haunted her very much of late, and had floated hazily in her mind all that morning, assumed in that one moment a more vivid life, and shone before her distinct and palpable as reality.

"If this stuff can do anything for my shattered nerves, I shall thank the man who invented it," muttered the widow, as she poured a few drops from Marcia's bottle.

She went to one of the windows presently, and stood there until she saw Miss Denison walk briskly along one of the winding paths leading towards the church. Then she went back to the glass, and looked at herself again, scrutinising the reflected face with a long and thoughtful gaze. After that leisurely scrutiny, Mrs. Harding took a handsomely-bound Church-service from amongst the numberless elegant possessions she had scattered about her apartment, and descended the grand staircase. She met no one on her way to the hall, though she lingered here and there upon the staircase to look out of a window, or to examine a picture, and she walked down the long corridor leading to the drawing-room with a slow languid step. The pretty amber-curtained room was quite empty when she entered it ; but a superb fire, a real Christmas fire, burned in the low grate, and reflected itself in the many-coloured Gothic tiles and the fantastic spikiness of the steel fender.

Mrs. Harding sank into a low chair, a perfect nest of downy puffiness and amber-satin damask ; a chair in which

to lounge away a lifetime, reading dreamy idyls in the intervals of a long chain of naps; a chair whose enervating influence stifled the voice of ambition, and deadened the reproving murmurs of conscience; a chair which might have transformed a Napoleon into an idle dreamer, and reduced a John Howard into a selfish Sybarite. Perhaps there never was a richer little study of colour, a more exquisite cabinet-picture, than the splendid widow seated in this chair and loosely robed in a dressing-gown of quilted purple silk, from whose voluminous folds peeped two slim feet, with arched insteps, that might have belonged to one of Alfred de Musset's Andalusian countesses; feet that were set off by grey-silk stockings and high-heeled slippers of glimmering bronze, adorned with coquettishly careless scarlet bows, from one of which a painter might have built up the image of a lovely *débardeuse* tripping away from a carnival ball; just as easily as a naturalist constructs his antediluvian mammoth out of a stray bone dug by hazard from the bowels of the earth. But beautiful as the accessories of the picture might be, there was something wanting to its completeness, and that was the very soul of the subject. The attitude was perfect, the background faultless; but the expression of repose was not there. Mrs. Harding's head lay back upon the puffy amber cushion, in the abandonment of feminine laziness; but Mrs. Harding's eyes wandered restlessly from the door to the fire, and from the fire back to the door. It was only when there was the sound of a footstep in the corridor, that the sweeping lashes drooped drowsily over the dark splendour of the widow's eyes, and the red lips parted like the lips of a sleeping child.

Nothing could be better in the way of histrionic art than the little movement of bewilderment and surprise with which Mrs. Harding started from that mock sleep on the entrance of the person whose footstep she had just heard on the corridor. The person was George Pauncefort. He shut the door behind him, bent his head to the widow with a stately gravity of gesture, and walked straight to the angle of the fire-place opposite that by which she was sitting. His manner could not have been more ceremonious had he been approaching a stranger, or I should rather say, his manner could not have been so ceremonious towards a stranger. There is a certain ceremony which a gentleman only assumes when he encounters an enemy. A French nobleman of the *vieille roche*, meeting his antagonist some dewy summer morning in the wood beyond the *barrière de l'Etoile*, might carry himself as Sir Jasper's tenant did to-day.

"Good-morning, Mrs. Harding," he said, always preserving

the same frigid manner ; " I believe it is by that name you desire to be known."

" If you please. It is a very unpretending name."

The widow retained her attitude of complete repose, and there was an exquisitely-simulated languor in the expression of her countenance, which might have deceived any one who had not seen her five minutes before.

" I thought it best that I should see you before leaving this house ; and I am glad to find this opportunity of speaking to you," said Mr. Pauncefort, very gravely.

" You are going to leave the Abbey, then ?"

" You cannot imagine that I should remain. I wish to leave without *esclandre*, if possible. I need scarcely say how entirely surprised I was by the meeting of last night."

" Unpleasantly surprised, I suppose ?" asked the widow.

There was a tightness about her handsome lips, a lurid glitter in her handsome eyes during this interview with Sir Jasper's tenant, that imparted rather a diabolical character to her dark beauty. There was a flimsy little sketch of a Judith, painted by Etty, in a corner of the drawing-room ; and the dark intensity of the face in the picture was less terrible than the expression that revealed itself under Blanche Harding's pearl-powder.

" Very unpleasantly," answered George Pauncefort. " The threshold of this house is the first I have crossed for fifteen years in the character of friend and guest. I had weighed well the probabilities for and against my meeting any one who knows me or my miserable story ; and under the peculiar circumstances of this household I believed myself safe. Of all creatures that ever lived upon this earth, you are the person whom I could least have expected to meet under this roof."

" Indeed ! And why ?"

No words can do justice to the amount of quiet aggravation which Mrs. Harding contrived to infuse into the enunciation of these four commonplace syllables. Only a woman, and a woman who had been accustomed to the feminine luxury of having some creature of the genus husband to torment could have obtained such a mastery over the elocution of malice.

" For many reasons. First, because you were bound by a promise never to return to this country."

" I have kept that promise faithfully for fifteen years. When I heard of you, it was always as a traveller in the wilds of Central Africa. My sister's death left me very lonely."

" Your sister's death !" cried Sir Jasper's tenant with something that was almost a groan. " God help you, Caro-

line! you might have been a different woman if that sister had died in her cradle."

Mrs. Harding lifted her head suddenly from its attitude of assumed languor, and looked at George Pauncefort with a fiercer light in her eyes than had shone in them yet.

"My sister had nothing to do with my sins," she said. "I can bear the weight of them myself."

"But for your sister's influence I do believe you might never have sinned. I think yours and your brother's nature were of that plastic kind, too weak to walk unaided in the path of virtue, not strong enough to stand alone in vice. You went the way that you were led, and there were two people who plotted together to lead you to perdition. Your sister, Leonora Fane, was one of them."

"You had better leave my sister's name out of the question. I have no wish to hear it."

"God knows how little wish I have to utter it. The past is past. I have wasted fifteen years in trying to bury the corpse of my perished youth, and I have not yet found the grave deep enough to hold the loathsome thing. Its ghost rises and follows me wherever I go. And now, Mrs. Harding, I have some right to know when you mean to leave this house."

"Why should I leave it?"

"Simply because you should never have entered it. You have no right to sleep under the same roof with Marcia Denison; you have no right to sit at the same table. Oh, God of heaven!" cried the tenant of the Hermitage with a sudden burst of passion, which was all the more terrible for the frigidity of his previous manner, "I saw you kiss her last night; and my mind went back to a summer's evening fifteen years ago when I watched you kiss your child as you gave him into his nurse's arms. I do not think you can have forgotten that evening, Caroline. I prayed once that the memory of it might haunt you on your deathbed."

The widow watched Sir Jasper's tenant with keenly scrutinising eyes as he spoke, and there was something like a scintillation of triumph in those big black orbs.

"You seem very anxious that no tainted thing should approach Miss Denison's purity," she said, with a sneer; "and yet I do not see how you come to be so deeply interested in the young lady's welfare."

"I am interested in the cause of truth against falsehood," sternly answered George Pauncefort. "Tell these people who and what you are. Let them know your antecedents; throw yourself upon their mercy; and *then* if they please to receive you, I will stand aloof and say nothing. If in all this world

you can find a creature generous enough to take you by the hand, knowing what you are, Heaven forbid that I should stand between you and that outstretched hand! But I will not help you in a lie; I will not look placidly on while you creep into a gentleman's hospitable household with a mask upon your face."

"In that case you had better tell Sir Jasper Denison my story. Of course he will repeat the substance of your revelation to his daughter, and I shall receive a polite notice to quit. Ah, Mr. Pauncefort, I don't think you will care to tell Miss Marcia Denison who and what I am."

"Why should I not?"

"I cannot give you a reason. Do you remember how Maître Jacques replies to Harpagon? *Je le crois parceque je le crois*. I can only offer you the same kind of answer—you will not because you will not."

The widow was beginning to recover a little of her habitual liveliness. She took Marcia's paper-knife from a table by her side, and began to cut open an illustrated newspaper—a Christmas number with the bright Christmas pictures, which it pleased the Voltairean Baronet to ridicule. Looking at her as she sat opposite to him, George Pauncefort's mind travelled back to the autumn evening upon which he had first entered that house; the evening on which he had watched Marcia Denison sitting in the dim glow of the fire, with that very paper-knife in her hand.

"It is only three months since that night," mused Sir Jasper's tenant, "and yet the larger half of my lifetime seems the period in which I have known her."

He was silent for some few minutes, and then he said gravely:

"I had a right to expect that you would keep your promise. I have wished you to be rich, in order that you might be at least beyond the reach of any sordid temptation. I do not threaten you now with a reduction or withdrawal of your income. But I tell you frankly that I will not suffer you to remain a visitor in this house, and the companion of Miss Denison."

"Then you will tell them—everything?"

A faint flush dyed Mr. Pauncefort's face and passed away before he answered this question.

"I shall take my own time to think of that," he said; "I only tell you that unless you leave this house with your own free will, and very speedily, I will do all I can to render your departure inevitable."

"When the inevitable moment arrives, I will go. In the mean time I am an invited guest; and I mean to remain."

"Caroline," exclaimed Sir Jasper's tenant, looking at the widow with an expression which was half stern, half pitiful, "I did not think it was in you to become so bold in wickedness."

"Fifteen years is a long time," answered Mrs. Harding. "You shut a woman out of the world in which good people live, and then you wonder at her if she becomes worse than she was at the hour of her exclusion."

"Fifteen years might have done much towards the redemption of the past, if you had spent them as you might have done. But I tell you, again, Caroline, it was your misfortune to be guided by the worst counsellor who ever whispered evil suggestions into a woman's ear. She is dead, and I have tried to think less bitterly of her, or not to think of her at all. May a merciful God have that compassion for her sins which I cannot feel! I have heard of you and Mrs. Fane during my dreary exile, and I have heard something of the kind of life you led, and the people whom you chose for your associates. But I will say no more. I have no wish to interfere with your life, except in the defence of friends whom I respect. I claim the right to call the people who inhabit this house my friends; and all that a gentleman may do in the service of his friends, I will do for them."

A shadow came between George Pauncefort and the light, as he said this, and looking up he saw Marcia Denison passing the window opposite to him. He bent his head gravely to Mrs. Harding, exactly as he had done before, and left the room.

He walked very rapidly along the corridor, but at the end of it he met Marcia Denison, bright and girlish-looking in her simple winter-bonnet, and with the frosty freshness of the out-of-door atmosphere hanging about her garments. Sir Jasper's tenant passed her with a smile and a bow, and went straight to his own apartment, where he spent some time in the concoction of a letter addressed to his host.

When he had folded and sealed the letter, he rang for his servant.

"I leave the Abbey this morning, Milward," he said; "I find myself quite unequal to the excitement of society. You will pack my portmanteau and follow me. But before you do so, you will give this letter to Sir Jasper Denison."

"Yes, Sir."

The well-bred servant expressed no astonishment whatever at this sudden change in his master's plans. He had served the man who called himself George Pauncefort for some six or seven years, and he had almost parted with the

faculty of astonishment in that long experience of a moody traveller's caprices. This abrupt departure from Scarsdale Abbey was only one evidence the more of that irritable nature which vainly sought for relief in change and action.

The valet assisted Mr. Pauncefort to put on his great-coat, followed him to the hall, and opened the door for him, and then went quietly back to the blue bed-room to pack the things which he had arranged in lavender-perfumed drawers the day before. And thus, on the day which in happy households is so bright a festival, Sir Jasper's tenant left Scarsdale Abbey to return to a cold hearth and an empty shelter, and to make his Christmas dinner off an ill-cooked mutton-chop eaten beside a smouldering fire of sputtering green logs.

"Driven out by her!" thought the hermit as he filled his meerschaum; "I think to-day's work is the moral of my own life. Driven away by her!"

CHAPTER XIII.

AWKWARD FOR SIR JASPER.

WHILE George Pauncefort was walking homeward beneath the frosty December sky, Sir Jasper Denison sat in his favourite chair under the shadow of the grim bronze sea-god, and slept the Sybarite's peaceful slumber, soothed by the monotonous ticking of the clock and the sighing of the wintry wind among the oaks, faintly heard through double windows of plate-glass.

The Baronet stirred himself slightly in his chair with a peevish movement when a servant entered the room and laid a letter on the table; but he did not open his eyes until the same man brought a reading-lamp and placed it in the centre of the chaos of papers and periodicals within reach of Sir Jasper's hand.

"What letter is that on the table yonder? Be so good as to give it to me, Jarvis; though I've no doubt it's something unpleasant," muttered the Baronet. What a portentous seal! Why, in the name of all that is absurd, do people try to make their letters look like death-warrants? Who brought this?" asked Sir Jasper, languidly stretching out his hand to receive the missive.

"It was not brought, Sir; Mr. Pauncefort's servant gave it to me when he left the Abbey."

"When he left the Abbey! What do you mean?"

"The letter will explain, Sir, I believe, from what Mr. Pauncefort's man said. He left at three o'clock, Sir, and Milward went a little before four."

"Oh, very well," murmured Sir Jasper with a dreary yawn, as the man left the room. "Mr. Pauncefort was free to go when he pleased: Diogenes has found our society unendurable, and gone back to his tub. The misfortune is that this Diogenes is really a very pleasant fellow, and I shall miss him. However, there is the lively widow. I wash my hands of Diogenes, and fall back upon the widow. Let us see what the fellow has to say for himself."

He tore open the envelope and read the following epistle:

"MY DEAR SIR JASPER,—It seems peculiarly ungracious to turn my back upon your hospitality on such a day as this, when the sanctity which always pervades a peaceful home is multiplied a hundred-fold by the memories which this day brings along with it. I leave your house very reluctantly, and I leave it only because there is a visitor beneath your roof whose presence renders it impossible that I should remain.

"When you mentioned Mrs. Harding's name before my introduction to her, I was not aware that I had ever met her in my life; but when I saw her, I recognised in her a woman whose career was very intimately known to me many years ago—a woman who is no fitting companion for your daughter, Miss Denison, since she is a wife who ran away from her husband, a mother who abandoned her child.

"It is on Miss Denison's account that I write this letter. Did you stand alone in the world, I might hold my peace, and suffer this woman to await the hour in which you would yourself discover the secret of her antecedents; but you would have the right to call me to a strict account of my conduct, were I to allow Mrs. Harding to remain under the roof that shelters your daughter. I do not stab your guest in the dark. You are at liberty to show this letter to Mrs. Harding, and to call upon either her to admit or disprove my accusations. If she should wish to see me in your presence, I shall be close at hand to support what I have said; but I have no more to say, and shall refuse to give any closer particulars of the broad facts which I have stated. I may add also, that I have no proofs to offer in confirmation of my charges against this lady. I can only ask you to believe in me as a gentleman; and I think you know me well enough to believe that

I should **not** write this letter if I did not consider myself compelled to do so.

"I leave your house, my dear Sir Jasper, with deep regret. The circumstances of my life have shut me out of a home of my own; and the only hearth at which I have accepted a place has been darkened by the shadow of a woman about whom I cannot teach myself to think charitably, even on this day. I thank you most heartily for the friendship you have so generously given to a stranger; and I trust that my abrupt departure will in no way deprive me of your confidence and regard.

"I shall ask permission to complete my broken visit on some future occasion; and I shall be obliged if you will give whatever explanation of my conduct you may think best to Miss Denison.

"I remain, my dear Sir Jasper,

"Always truly yours,

"GEORGE PAUNCEFORT."

"Humph!" muttered the Baronet; "this is pleasant. A lively widow billeted upon one, with bandboxes that predicate a six-weeks' visit at the least; and lo and behold, an unexpected denunciation of her as an improper person. And on the traditionary festive occasion too! What am I to do? Give her a polite quietus? There is no possibility of getting rid of her without *esclandre*. A runaway wife? Is it true, I wonder? Surely yes; my tenant is a gentleman, and would not be so base as to slander a woman. This comes of picking up agreeable widows at such a place as Homburg. However, I must temporise matters, and get rid of her quietly as soon as I can; the woman's antecedents are not infectious, and the woman is a lady, though very florid. Marcia is far too strong-minded to be influenced in the smallest degree by any companionship; so there need be no feverish hurry about the matter."

While Sir Jasper mused thus with Mr. Pouncefort's letter in his hand, the door was opened very softly, and a silken rustling betrayed the sex of the person who opened it. Then a head peeped into the room, and then the door was thrown quite open, and Mrs. Harding appeared, splendid in ruby velvet, with white shoulders glimmering under a black-lace shawl, and diamond stars in her hair.

"I peeped in to see if you were taking your afternoon nap," she said; "but I am so glad to find you awake. Oh, dear Sir Jasper, I have something so *very* serious, so extremely unpleasant to say to you."

"Indeed," thought the Baronet; "and I have something

very unpleasant to say to you whenever I can bring my courage to the sticking-place;" but he only bowed, with a little unintelligible murmur expressive of every thing that was unmeaningly polite.

He looked at her even more critically than usual. He had never seen her beauty more brilliant than it was to-night. Her cheeks seemed to be flushed with a natural crimson, her eyes sparkled with the effect of excitement, and not the ghastly brightness induced by belladonna; and beyond this the Baronet looked at her with a new interest, inspired by the contents of his tenant's letter, just as he would have looked all the more eagerly at a handsome Frenchwoman in the Bois de Boulogne, had he been told that she was Marie Laffarge.

"Dear Sir Jasper," said the widow, sinking gracefully into the chair opposite to the Baronet, "I am going to ask you all sorts of abrupt questions—impertinent questions you may perhaps think; but I trust you will believe that I am justified in asking them."

The Baronet bowed, with another polite little murmur. "What, in mercy's name, is the woman going to say?" he thought.

He had not observed Mrs. Harding's eyes fixing themselves for a moment on the letter in his hand, or the tightening of the lips that accompanied the glance.

"How long have you known Mr. Pauncefort?"

Sir Jasper was not very often surprised; but this question, asked by the widow with a certain business-like earnestness of tone, startled him out of his languid equanimity.

"I have not known him very long. But why do you ask the question?"

"I will tell you presently, when you have answered another. Was Mr. Pauncefort presented to you by any of your friends?"

"No."

"I thought not!" exclaimed the widow.

"Mr. Pauncefort is my tenant, and he is a gentleman. His manners please me. I respect his intellect, and I like his society. Am I to wait till some Smith or Brown of my acquaintance comes to me and says, 'My dear Sir Jasper, my friend Pauncefort is dying to know you. Will you allow me to present him to you?' Sir Jasper Denison, Mr. Pauncefort, —Mr. Pauncefort, Sir Jasper Denison; eminently adapted for each other, 'I'm shaw!' and so on? No, Mrs. Harding, I choose my friends for myself, and on my own responsibility. And I very rarely make a mistake."

The Baronet's eyes fixed themselves very earnestly upon

the widow as he said this. Mrs. Harding's face darkened just a little under the scrutiny, and her glance, which had been very steady until now, wandered restlessly to the letter in Sir Jasper's hand.

"I am very sorry that you have chosen Mr. Pauncefort for your friend," Mrs. Harding said very gravely.

"Why so?"

"Because he is unworthy of your friendship, unfit to be the associate of your daughter."

"Indeed! how unworthy? why unfit?"

"Because those who know him know him to be a bad man. A gentleman does not exile himself from his fellow-men without a sufficient reason. I knew George Pauncefort before he left England; and I have been given to understand, by those who know the mysteries of such matters, that when he turned his back upon his country he left a tainted name behind him."

"But what, in Heaven's name, had he done?" cried the Baronet, sitting erect in his chair, in the extremity of his bewilderment.

"How can I tell you? A woman never hears the real particulars of these stories. My husband was a man of the world. *He* knew the truth, I have no doubt; but I heard only hints and insinuations. I can tell you no more. I dare say the story was a common story enough; but it had the effect of driving the chief actor in it out of England; and even now, when he has returned to this country, he seems to have returned only to seek a safer hiding-place."

Sir Jasper drew a long breath, and stared hopelessly, first at the lady opposite to him, and then at the letter in his hand. Here were separate denunciations, almost equally vague in their character, brought against each other by two people who were both unable or unwilling to substantiate their accusations by any means whatever. Which of the two was to be believed? that was the question.

"Egad! I'm afraid Pauncefort must be the sinner," thought Sir Jasper, despondently, "since he has been the man to leave the field, and fire his big gun from a masked battery. I am sorry for it. I would rather have let this frivolous widow down the wind, to prey at fortune, than lose my argumentative evenings with the man who doesn't believe in the Encyclopédists. What a misfortune it is to be the father of an unmarried daughter! If I were alone in the world, the man's antecedents would not be of the smallest importance. He would scarcely break into my plate-room to steal my Cellini cup, or my Cromwellian tankards; and if he forged my acceptance, the man who discounted the bill would be the principal

victim. But society reminds me that I have a daughter, and that it is for her, and not for myself, that I must choose my acquaintance."

Mrs. Harding watched her host with sharp scrutinising eyes during the brief pause in which he abandoned himself to these reflections. There had been many critical moments in the life of the woman who called herself Blanche Harding, but not one more critical than this.

At last that brief delay, which seemed so long, came to an end.

"I should be very glad if you would be a little more explicit, my dear Madam," exclaimed Sir Jasper rather testily. "Of all things I dislike these vague accusations, which can neither be proved nor disproved. However, you need give yourself no further uneasiness upon the subject of Mr. Pauncefort, for that gentleman left my house two hours ago, and is not likely to re-enter it while you do me the honour to remain under my roof."

"Now if *she* is the culprit," thought the Baronet, "that will hit her rather hard."

"I thought as much!" answered the widow triumphantly. "I could see that Mr. Pauncefort recognised me yesterday evening, though his affectation of unconsciousness was very cleverly managed. You may have observed that he was not quite himself, either at the dinner-table or in the drawing-room."

"You are right, Madam. My friend was gloomy," returned Sir Jasper, thoughtfully.

"Oh, there's no doubt about it," he continued mentally; "Pauncefort is the guilty party. This woman could never carry the position so boldly unless indeed she were a past mistress in the art of cool impudence."

"And now, dear Sir Jasper, I must ask a thousand pardons for having bored you with this most unpleasant topic; but my respect, my affection for your sweet Marcia——"

"You are very good!" exclaimed the Baronet, cutting in suddenly upon Mrs. Harding's gushing apology. "Yes, I begin to feel the embarrassment which a man labours under who tries to choose his friends for himself, forgetting that he is encumbered with an unmarried daughter. Let us say no more about it, my dear Mrs. Harding. I see you are dressed for dinner, and as my own toilet is still unmade.——"

"My dear Sir Jasper, I am going to leave you this moment. Pray tell me that you do not think my intrusion impertinent——"

"Not at all," murmured the Baronet, looking thoughtfully at his tenant's letter

Mrs. Harding rose, and with one of those gliding curtains which her admirers considered infinitely bewitching, swept her ruby-velvet splendour out of Sir Jasper's den. She went straight to the drawing-room, where she found Marcia sitting in a very thoughtful attitude, with an open book lying on the leopard-skin rug at her feet, just where it had slipped from her knee. She looked up as her visitor entered the room; and there was just a shade of disappointment in her expression as she recognised the lady in ruby velvet.

"My dear Mrs. Harding, how superbly you are dressed!" she exclaimed; "and we shall have no one here to admire your elaborate toilet, except ourselves—and Mr. Pouncefort."

"Not even Mr. Pouncefort," answered the widow gaily. "Mr. Pouncefort has left the Abbey."

"Left us! Impossible! Papa told me he was to spend some weeks with us."

Mrs. Harding shrugged her shoulders.

"That is quite possible, dearest Marcia. But, for some sufficient reasons of his own, Mr. Pouncefort has left the Abbey this afternoon."

"For good?"

"I believe so. Yes, I may venture to say that I am sure he will not return—while I am here."

Marcia Denison turned in her chair to look more intently at her visitor, who was standing near a table at a little distance from her, trifling listlessly with the Laureate's last volume, gorgeous in white morocco and gold.

"Mrs. Harding," said Marcia earnestly, "do you *know* Mr. Pouncefort?"

"I do know something of him. My husband was acquainted with him fifteen years ago. I used to hear a great deal about him."

"Nothing to his disadvantage, I suppose."

"I regret to say that I heard a great deal to his disadvantage."

"Have you any objection to speak more definitely, Mrs. Harding? I am really interested in Mr. Pouncefort, and it will be very difficult for me to think hardly of him. *What* is it that you know to his discredit?"

"Nothing that I can tell you, dearest Marcia. I have just seen your papa, and I have spoken very frankly to him. I was very young fifteen years ago, and my husband was not one of those sort of men who think they are privileged to sully a wife's ears with a scandal they would not dare to repeat in the presence of any other woman. I have heard Mr. Pouncefort condemned; but his delinquencies were only hinted at. I thought it my duty to put your papa in posses-

sion of what I know; and I can say no more. Pray let us change the subject, dear. It is such a very unpleasant one."

"Too unpleasant to be dismissed so lightly, I think," Marcia answered gravely. "I should be sorry to think ill of Mr. Pauncefort. I have pitied him so much for his loneliness—for his poverty, which seems like the poverty of a man who has once been rich; and you remember what a modern French playwright has said, '*on s'habitue quelque fois à ne pas avoir d'argent, jamais à non plus avoir.*' The poverty of a ruined gentleman must be very bitter; and I have thought that Mr. Pauncefort supports his position so nobly."

The volume in Mrs. Harding's hand was open as Marcia said this, and she was looking down at its pages, with her head slightly averted from Miss Denison. There was something very much like a smile upon her face during this little disquisition on Mr. Pauncefort's circumstances.

"It would be so difficult for me to think badly of him," said Marcia very thoughtfully. "Surely, Mrs. Harding, you would scarcely consider it just to condemn him upon the strength of some scandal of the past, of whose details you are absolutely ignorant."

"My dear Marcia," exclaimed the widow with delightful *insouciance*, "for my own part, I am positively lax in my opinions. I have lived so long on the Continent, you know, and have associated so much with charming artistic Bohemians. But on your account I considered it incumbent upon me to tell your papa all I had ever heard against Mr. Pauncefort. And I must say that his abrupt departure is rather calculated to confirm my bad opinion of him."

Miss Denison did not make any reply to this speech. That undefined dislike, that vague antipathy to the magnificent woman whom her father had chosen to patronise, was very much in the ascendant just now over the Christian-like feeling with which she had tried to combat it. There must be some reason for our unconquerable aversion to Doctor Fell, however guilty we may feel with regard to a prejudice that is apparently so groundless; but when the unpleasant Doctor attacks the friend we like, our hatred of him is multiplied a hundred-fold all at once. Marcia tried to be very polite to Mrs. Harding when the conversation drifted into general topics; but there was something palpably constrained in her civility, which the widow was quite clever enough to understand.

Nor did Marcia recover her accustomed cheerfulness throughout that Christmas evening. She sat in her low chair by the fire, with her face half hidden by a screen of many-coloured Indian plumage, and abandoned herself to thoughtful silence, while the widow amused Sir Jasper. Never

had that lady taken more trouble to make herself agreeable, and never had she better succeeded. Her vivacity was inexhaustible, her gaiety almost irresistible; and the Baronet, with whom the pleasure of the moment was ill-important, gave himself up to enjoyment, and determined to believe Mrs. Harding's statement rather than the denunciatory letter in his pocket. Nothing could be more complete than the widow's triumph over her enemy.

It was very late that night when Marcia stood by the window of her dressing-room, looking out at the wide expanse of spreading lawn, the stately avenue, the distant woodland, all wan and ghostly of aspect in the pale wintry moonlight. Far away in the recesses of that wood a man watched perhaps, solitary, friendless, hopeless, sitting alone by a dreary hearth,—a modern Marius amongst the ruins of his shattered life.

Had baseness of any kind ever stained that life; and was it from disgrace as well as from poverty that Sir Jasper's tenant had come to hide himself in the quiet depths of Scarsdale wood?

"I cannot think him anything but what he seems," thought Marcia, musing pensively, with her forehead leaning against the broad woodwork of the window, and her eyes fixed on the moonlit distance. "I cannot think him anything less than a high-minded gentleman, with a proud humility of noble blood, the calm philosophy of a scholar and a Christian. I will not accept a slander against him on the word of a woman I distrust. I do not think I could believe my best friend if he spoke against George Pauncefort. Only from his own lips would I receive the evidence of his baseness."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE WIDOW MAKES HERSELF AT HOME.

AFTER that Christmas evening Mrs. Harding made herself entirely at home at Scarsdale Abbey. Perhaps she was aware of Marcia's distaste for her society; but if it was so, she endured that young lady's injustice quite uncomplainingly. She knew that she pleased Sir Jasper, and that the Baronet was sovereign lord and ruler in his own house, not to be

influenced in the smallest degree by a daughter for whom he had very little affection. The widow knew this, and she played her cards accordingly. She took care to intrude herself upon Marcia's society as little as possible, and, except for an occasional drive, the two ladies very rarely met between breakfast and dinner. Marcia had her own occupations, her pet Dorothy, and her Scarsdale poor. Marcia painted, and composed music, and read her favourite books in her own apartments, and very often rode or walked in the park and woods alone; while Blanche Harding lounged in the downiest and puffiest chair by the fire in her spacious bed-room, reading a novel, or recruiting her good looks by means of a prolonged nap. The utmost intellectual labour which she ever achieved was the composition of two or three lengthy epistles, written in violet ink on pale-green paper that was overpoweringly perfumed with patchouli or otto of roses.

The widow managed to dispose of two or three hours out of every day in the elaborate process of a studied toilet. She exhibited the contents of her big trunks and the treasures of her jewel-case, as persistently as she could have done if the Abbey had been filled with visitors; and she presented some variety of personal embellishment every evening for Sir Jasper's edification. Had she any deep-laid scheme to carry out in that dull country-house? Had she any motive over and above the desire to while away two or three winter months in a luxurious mansion? She seemed rich, and was scarcely likely to play the part of a sponge who ekes-out a limited income by long visits to country friends. Sir Jasper Denison fancied that he could read the secret of the charming widow's tactics, and gave her very great credit for her ingenuity.

"Mrs. Harding with possibly doubtful antecedents is less than nobody," mused the Baronet; "for she is a somebody whom people are apt to suspect. But lady Denison would be a person of importance, with a platform for the exhibition of handsome dresses, and all the best dinner-tables in the county open to the display of *cabochon* emeralds and old point. But to imagine for a moment that I am so weak as that! A frivolous widow—for life! As a visitor she is charming, and she shall play *ecarté* with me, and sing those fiery little Spanish ballads, those dreamy little German love-songs, as long as she likes; but if ever she entraps me into saying any thing—before a witness—or writing any thing that the most pig-headed of English juries can construe into a promise to marry, I will forfeit, why—any damages those twelve pig-headed British jurymen may please to exact. No, no, my dear Mrs. Harding, I will play cards with you; I will admire you;

I will devote my evenings to your delightful society ; I will accept the pretty flatteries which you so subtly administer to me ; I will give you the best rooms in my house and the best wines in my cellar—to say nothing of that choice Maraschino for which you have such a predilection ; but I will not marry you.”

Amongst the letters which Sir Jasper's postbag brought to Mrs. Harding, there was one which evidently gave the receiver of it some annoyance. It was rather a long letter, written in a dashing masculine hand, and sealed with a big coat-of-arms ferociously supported by dragons rampant, and surmounted by a couple of crests and a bellicose motto, “I strike home.” Any one versed in human nature might have made a very shrewd guess at the unpleasant character of that distinguished-looking missive, for the widow thrust it hurriedly into her pocket, after glancing at the first few lines, as if it was a letter which she could not trust herself to read in public. And after having done this, it was with considerable difficulty that she again became the gushingly spontaneous trifler she was wont to be in Sir Jasper Denison's society.

An hour after breakfast she sat alone in her own room, reading that unwelcome letter, and pondering its contents with a very moody brow.

“*Half Moon Street, Thursday.*”

“MY DEAR ASPASIA, BELCOLORE, DELILAH, — By what name, among all the names by which dangerous beauty has been known to men and poets since the world began, am I to call you, since you do not choose to be addressed by that appellation which you received at the baptismal font? Shall it be *Aspasia*? You are beautiful and wise, and a modern Socrates might learn new wisdom from those rosy lips. Let it be *Aspasia*. I have breakfasted with some young diplomats at the St. James's, and I am in an expansive humour ; a mood in which I think kindly of all the world, and regret, almost to tears, that everybody cannot have thirty thousand a-year—beginning with myself. And now, my dear *Aspasia*, let us be serious. Why did you leave Homburg without informing me of your intention, without placing me *au courant* with regard to your plans? You did not imagine that there was any corner of the civilised earth where you could conceal yourself from that subtle instinct of your whereabouts which is one of the numerous evidences of the sincere and brotherly attachment I entertain towards you. My own *Aspasia*, the step was silly, not to say childish. When I called at your hotel and found that you were gone, I was not indignant ; I

was only annoyed by the discovery that a woman whom I respected as infinitely superior to the rest of her sex had, in this one affair, sunk into the lowest depth of feminine short-sightedness. Your abrupt departure was ungenerous—I pass over that; but it was also absurd. In the words of the prince of detective policemen: ‘It was worse than a crime,—it was a blunder!’

“Need I say that I traced you with perfect ease as far as Paris? Need I say that I knew where to look you up in Paris? Unluckily I looked you up a day or two too late—you had left for England. Here I was at fault. I had not imagined that you were likely to cross the Channel, and, having crossed it, I was quite at a loss to surmise where you would take up your abode.

“What a wonderful institution is a provincial newspaper! Waiting for my attorney yesterday in a stuffy office in the Fields, I took up a paper from the dusty heap of journals on his dusty table, and read half-a-dozen vapid paragraphs in which stale scraps from the London press, local wife-beatings, and prize mangel-wurzel were arranged in an agreeable mosaic. No one but a man waiting for his lawyer in a back-office in Lincoln’s Inn with a view to raising money on very shaky security could have read such a paper as that. But your Latude or your Robinson Selkirk—no, Crusoe, will associate with rats or Negroes, as the case may be. For the time being I was Robinson what’s-his-name, and the newspaper was my man Friday.

“The journal in question was the *Roxborough Conservative and Castleford Chronicle*, and the paragraph which startled me from my drowsiness ran as follows,—I copy verbatim from the notice which I cut out of the paper:

“‘The Christmas festivities will be of a very quiet nature at Scarsdale Abbey, as the family affliction which shed a gloom over the neighbourhood some few years since, and has caused the lengthened absence of the Baronet and his daughter from this country, still keeps Sir Jasper Denison secluded from the society he is so eminently calculated to adorn. Beef, coals, and flannel have been, and will continue to be, liberally distributed amongst the poor of Scarsdale and its vicinity, under the auspices of Miss Denison.

“‘Mrs. Harding arrived at the Abbey on Tuesday evening from the Continent,’ &c. &c.

“So you see, my dear Aspasia, the professional twaddle of provincial newspapers supplies me the information of your whereabouts; and I seize the opportunity of appealing to your generosity to rescue me from a very unpleasant dilemma.”

And then followed one of those appeals for pecuniary assist-

ance which are always so painful in their sordid details,—one of those appeals which are peculiarly horrible when they come from a man to a woman. There was a covert something in the tone of this man who wrote to Blanche Harding which hinted at a hidden influence more powerful than womanly tenderness or generosity. He wrote very politely; but he wrote like a man who makes a demand which cannot be refused, and Mrs. Harding's face grew darker as she read.

When she had finished the letter she sat for a long time with her head resting on her hand, thinking deeply.

"If I could only escape from it all, if I could escape!" she muttered. "But to find myself penniless! No, I can bear anything better than *that*."

Sir Jasper Denison had taken care to leave his daughter entirely in the dark as to George Pauncefort's letter and Mrs. Harding's communication. In the first place, there would have been some trouble involved in any explanation made to Marcia, and of all things the Baronet hated trouble. In the second place, Sir Jasper felt that if either the tenant of the Hermitage or the dashing widow were not quite the sort of person he should have received under his roof, their might be some blame attaching to himself for having selected these acquaintance in defiance of all social laws, which demand that a man should know whom he admits to the companionship of his daughter. Under these circumstances the Baronet determined upon holding his peace, and allowing matters to take their own course.

"If the widow's notions of a friendly visit are unreasonable," he thought, "I have only to be capricious, and be seized all at once with a desire to spend the chilly spring months on the borders of the Mediterranean, and we get rid of her without *esclandre*. And, oh, what a blessing to avoid *that*!"

Miss Denison resumed the quiet current of her life—only deferring now and then to the pleasure of her visitor in the matter of a long drive, or a day's shopping in Roxborough or Castleford. She had so many occupations, so many little cares, so many duties which, small in themselves and performed as quietly as the movements of some delicate piece of clock-work, made in the aggregate a considerable sum of usefulness. Marcia spent a good deal of time among the poor of Scarsdale; and as Scarsdale was a little village on the farthest edge of that wood in which Mr. Pauncefort's habitation was buried, hidden and lonely as the covert of a stag, her duty often took her along a pathway winding through the wood. On most of these occasions Dorothy Tursgood accompanied her mistress, carrying a basket; silent when her mistress was

silent, listening differentially if Miss Marcia talked, chattering gaily if Miss Marcia was pleased to encourage her chatter, and altogether behaving like a little maid whom no amount of indulgence could spoil. Sometimes, but very rarely, Marcia went upon her charitable errands alone; and it happened very often in this bleak January weather that the tenant of the Hermitage was strolling in the same pathway, attended by a mongrel dog, which he had lately adopted for his companion, and as indifferent to the blasts that howled among the leafless trees and scattered the withered fern, as if he had been some Norseman accustomed to spend the winter months in regions where the sun was never seen.

Meeting thus, Sir Jasper's tenant and Sir Jasper's daughter were wont to walk side by side in the chill afternoon sunlight, talking of almost all things in heaven and on earth, with wondering Dorothy in attendance, and the mongrel dog trotting meekly at his master's heels. How much two highly-educated people, who lead a very quiet existence, and live chiefly amongst the books they love, have to talk about when they are sufficiently familiar to converse without restraint, and are in no way fettered by the presence of other people! How many different worlds open before them! what mystic regions stretch far and wide beyond this common earth, tempting their exploring feet! Marcia delighted in those afternoon walks with the grave traveller, who was old enough to be her father, and in whose presence her mind and soul expanded themselves as freely as they might have done had she been indeed his daughter.

Sometimes Mr. Pauncefort accompanied the fair young *châtelaine* on her charitable errands; and Marcia found to her surprise that this bronzed African traveller, this bearded recluse, was almost as welcome as herself in labourers' cottages and by the beds of sick children; although, as Dorothy very often repeated, he never gave anything. "And yet he seems so kind, doesn't he, Miss Marcia? and I'm sure if he was rich he'd be generous, and his not being generous must be his poverty. And oh, Miss Marcia, no one that wasn't *dreadfully* poor would wear that shabby coat!" exclaimed the little maid, who thought the produce of the silkworm and the feathers of the ostrich the noblest objects ever created by Beneficent Power.

All through January and February Mrs. Harding remained at the Abbey, succeeding so well in amusing Sir Jasper that whenever she did make some little protest about the length of her visit, and threaten an early departure, the Baronet himself invited her to remain; always taking care that his invitations, however cordial, should be so worded as to defy the

most subtle of the Buzfuz tribe to torture them into the promise of marriage by inference.

"I know my *Pickwick*," thought Sir Jasper; "and I know the Scylla and Charybdis between which I have to steer my fragile bark. Scylla is pen, ink, and paper, and Charybdis is witnesses. It was Winkle who brought down ruin upon his excellent friend—Winkle, and that foolish *poulet* about the chops and tomato-sauce."

Marcia had told her father of Mrs. Harding's vague hints affecting George Pouncefort's reputation, and the Baronet had pooh-poohed them, glad to escape a subject which was apt to make him feel rather uncomfortable. Truth will always seem more or less like itself, even when falsehood contrives to seize the best position, and place poor Truth at a disadvantage; and Sir Jasper, in despite of the widow's plausibility, was rather inclined to attach some credit to his tenant's earnest letter. He had answered that letter after his own fashion,—for he was too well-bred to leave it unanswered,—evading any definite reply, and shuffling away from the subject with polite lamentations about Mr. Pouncefort's departure.

And did Marcia believe Mrs. Harding's insinuations against the man whom she met so often, and whose society was so very pleasant to her? No, human nature is not given to belief in the person it does not like, when that person belies the friend it does like. Marcia had very little confidence in the widow's truth; and she had an instinctive trust in the man whom the widow slandered. Every time she met him; every time she heard his voice, or looked in his face, or saw him sitting amongst the sordid squalor of some labourer's cottage, listening gravely to a woman's story of her woes and wants; every time that she saw the dark eyes soften as they fixed themselves upon some peasant's child,—that confidence in George Pouncefort's truth and honesty grew stronger. She told her father sometimes of those chance meetings with his tenant, and the Baronet uttered no word of objection to the continuance of that intimacy which had begun during Mr. Pouncefort's autumn visit to the Abbey.

"I will have an explanation with Pouncefort as soon as I get rid of the widow," he thought, "and ascertain who and what the man is. In the mean time I know he is a gentleman, and, if need were, I could rely on Marcia's good sense against a legion of bearded travellers. If the man is anything that he ought not to be, she will be the first to find him out: for her instincts are keener than mine, and she has not my habitual laziness to contend against."

With this amiable sophistry, Sir Jasper Denison left his

daughter to take care of herself, while he lounged away his days in the retirement of his library, and allowed his evenings to be beguiled by the fascinating widow. To poor Marcia those evenings were very long and tiresome, and she was very glad when her father's favourite *ecarté* suffered her to absorb herself in a book. Little by little the brightest time in her life grew to be those hours in which she walked with George Pauncefort in Scarsdale wood; and when her home seemed dreariest, her existence most barren, she found herself looking forward to the next accidental meeting with her father's tenant as a bright oasis, the very contemplation of which rendered the surrounding desert endurable.

One day, sitting before the glass, in her dressing-room, with pretty Dorothy busily employed in brushing her mistress's dark-brown hair, Marcia's thoughts wandered, as they were very apt to wander in the dreary emptiness of her life, to that genial companionship which she had learnt to delight in.

"If I had only had such a man for my father," she thought "how happy I might have been!"

And then all at once a crimson flush spread itself over Marcia Denison's pale face, as she remembered that there was one other relationship, dearer and nearer even than the tie which binds a father to the child of his love, which George Pauncefort might bear to her.

"And I am so rich," she thought, "and so lonely, while he is poor and friendless. Would it be very strange if such a thing were to come to pass?"

But after a pause she thought regretfully—

"Oh, why does he not trust me? Why does he not tell me the story of his past life—the secret of it, if there is a secret?"



CHAPTER XV.

DOROTHY'S ENGAGEMENT.

THE arbitrary baker who dealt out his customers' dinners like a pack of cards at a given hour, and thereby obliged Mr. Dobb to dine at one o'clock on a Sunday, exercised no influence on that gentleman's domestic arrangements for the rest of the day; and on almost every Sunday evening throughout the year the brewer's clerk was wont to entertain his friends in a manner which was as economical as it was primitive. No troublesome preparations, to be achieved with wailing and gnashing

of teeth by Mrs. Dobb, were involved in Henry Adolphus's "Sundays;" no bewildering arithmetical calculation of spoons and forks, dessert-knives and carvers, finger-glasses and salt-cellars, had to be gone through by that lady. No occasional butler, proprietor of a neighbouring milk-walk, had to be consulted as to *his* engagements before the guests could be bidden. The "at home" of an early settler in the Australian bush could scarcely have been more unceremonious than Mr. Dobb's mode of entertaining his friends.

At an uncertain hour after the clearing away of the tea-things the clerk's little circle began to assemble. It was always the same circle, and it always gathered in the same manner; and what it did on one Sunday it did on almost every Sunday through the year. As the winter dusk deepened into darkness, as the summer sunset darkened into dusk, Mr. Dobb's masculine acquaintance dropped in at Amanda Villas, and settled themselves for a pleasant evening. In the clerk's circle there was a good deal understood by the phrase "dropping in." It meant that costume was looser in its regulations than the Duke de Bassano would quite approve of in the guests he invites to his imperial master's mansion. It meant that coloured waistcoats and flaming neckties were admissible; it meant unlimited indulgence from Mrs. Dobb in the matter of smoking. It even went so far as to mean the toleration of shirt-sleeves in very warm weather; and it meant a financial system with regard to refreshment and tobacco, which Mr. Dobb alluded to briefly as "Yorkshire," but which has been made familiar to us in that Scottish drinking-song called "Auld lang syne," wherein the noblest spirit of good-fellowship seems to be embodied in the rule that every man should pay his own score.

The refreshment which Mr. Dobb's visitors affected was half-and-half. When the four or five droppers-in who constituted the clerk's circle had assembled, the maid-of-all-work was despatched to the nearest tavern for a gallon of half-and-half, and to the nearest tobacconist's for a quarter of a pound of bird's-eye. Mr. Dobb, as a brewer's clerk and a family-man, had a cask of XX from the brewery for his household consumption; but Mr. Dobb, in the character of Amphitryon, preferred the half-and-half procured for ready-money from the tavern; for the "Yorkshire" system would have been clumsy in its application to beer supplied from the entertainer's private cellar, and might have entailed long credits and even bad debts. When the domestic returned from her mission, the can of half-and-half was placed in the centre of Mr. Dobb's round-table, and an array of blown-glass tumblers ranged at its base; the bird's eye circulated amongst the guests in a jam-pot; and the evening's entertainment commenced. The evening's enter-

tainment appeared to consist chiefly in the consumption of the beer and bird's-eye. Sometimes the maid-of-all-work was despatched for a second gallon; very frequently she had to fetch fresh supplies of tobacco; although every one of Mr. Dobb's visitors carried in his waistcoat-pocket a fragment of a black-looking compound, which he chopped or scraped solemnly at intervals to mingle with his bird's-eye, and which he called Cavendish. The capacity which Mr. Dobb and his friends displayed for the consumption of beer was something startling. They were not particularly thirsty; and the half-and-half, always growing gradually flatter as the evening waned, was by no means particularly nice; but the visitors imbibed glass after glass of the beverage with as solemn a relish as if the muddy-brown mixture in their tumblers had been the rarest vintage of the Rhine. With beer and tobacco Mr. Dobb's acquaintance seemed to find a perennial charm in his society. Without beer and tobacco they could not endure him for a moment: for it happened sometimes that the guests, unmindful of the hour, allowed the public-house to close before they had renewed their supplies; and lo, suddenly, when the genial spirit of good-fellowship was at its brightest, the tin bottom of the can revealed itself glimmering through a swiftly-ebbing tide of half-and-half, and the revellers were fain to part sad and despondent. To have continued their conversation, to have sung another song or listened to another recitation, or to have lingered together in friendly intercourse for another half-hour *without* beer would have been an impossibility; and the guests departed, determined to keep a sharper look-out upon the can and the hour next time. Sometimes when Mr. Dobb was in an expansive humour, he would ask his friends to partake of the cold baked meats remaining from his family-table, unlimited pickles of a very vinegary character, and a stale half-quartern; but this did not happen very often; for the boldest masculine spirit will quail before the settled blackness on a female visage, when Monday's dinner disappears before the ravages of unconscious Sunday visitors.

Little Dorothy Tursgood, spending a Sabbath holiday very often with her Cousin Selina, had frequently enjoyed the privilege of joining in the Sunday evening festivities. Country cousins are convenient people to know; and Selina Dobb found her civilities to Dorothy very advantageously requited by an occasional basket from the home-farm; and then Selina liked to hear all about Miss Marcia, and what she did, and what she wore, and what her bonnets cost; and what the parlour-dinners were like at the Abbey; and whether Sir Jasper was going to leave off living like a hermit; and so on. Dorothy was always welcome whenever her indulgent mistress was pleased

to give her a Sunday's holiday ; it being understood that she was to be seen safely back to the Abbey by the Dobbs, or fetched by her father, and that she was to return at a certain hour.

Until very lately Dorothy had been quite resigned to leaving the festive circle at rather an early period. The atmosphere created by so many clay pipes was rather trying, and Dorothy found very little amusement in the society of half-a-dozen solemn young men, or in the stereotyped witticisms of Henry Adolphus. But latterly Dorothy had found the tobacco-laden atmosphere of the crowded little parlour as delightful as the perfumed air of an earthly paradise. Latterly Dorothy had found even Mr. Dobb's jokes amusing ; or she had at least found it amusing to listen to some one else, whose subdued accents were not heard by the general company during the laughter that followed the clerk's sallies. Of late Mr. Gervoise Catheron, the sub-lieutenant of marines, had been an occasional dropper-in at Amanda Villas : and by an odd coincidence his occasional droppings-in always happened to occur upon the evenings which Dorothy spent with her cousin.

He came on those evenings because he knew that she was there. He watched her as she left the chapel, and found out all about it. He told her so ; and he told her that he loved her very dearly, and that no other woman should be his wife. He was only waiting to turn himself round, he said, and to get out of this beastly corps, and get something to live upon, and then he would ask her to marry him immediately ; and he did not care a—something very wicked, at which Dorothy gave a pretty little scream, and put her dumpling hands over his mouth—what his family or his friends might choose to say about any inequality of rank between the Catherons and the Tursgoods.

• What the deuce is the good of your old family, that they should make such a howling about it ? " demanded Mr. Catheron peevishly. " Will your old family keep you ? If it would, I'd say something to it. Will your old family pay your debts ? not a bit of it. I've heard my father say that in his time the King's Bench was peopled with old families ; and the more certain it was that a man's ancestors came over with William the Conqueror, the more likely the man himself was to die in the Rules. Our family can trace itself back to the reign of Edward the Confessor ; and a precious deal of good we get out of him, when we've bothered our brains to work ourselves back to him. If we could fasten the other end of our family on to a rich cotton-spinner or a wealthy iron-founder, we might get some recompense for our trouble ; but if I wanted to do a little bit of stiff to-morrow, and Edward

the Confessor could come out of his grave to put his name to it, his stupid old signature wouldn't be worth the paper it was written upon—even if he could write, which I haven't the faintest doubt he couldn't, since the other fellow, William the what's-his-name, never got beyond Bill Stokes, his mark. So when I marry Dorothy, I shall please myself, and Edward the Confessor may be——”

The dumpling hand went up to arrest the utterance of another wicked word, and then Dorothy trotted along beside her lover proud and happy. He acted as Mr. Dobb's proxy sometimes, and escorted her to the gates of Scarsdale park; for Selina had been taken into Dorothy's confidence, and knew that her cousin and the sub-lieutenant were engaged. She had even heard as much from the lips of that gentleman himself, who declared his intentions to be strictly honourable, but who begged that they might not be revealed to Mr. Dobb, who was a “talking fellow, and would be likely to go blabbing the business all over Castleford,” Mr. Catheron said.

So Dorothy was engaged. The lieutenant's declaration had come very soon, and yet she did not think that it had come abruptly; for a new existence seemed to have dawned for her since the day when she had first seen him looking at her in the humble little chapel: and now when she tried to remember what her life had been like without him, she lost herself in the effort to recall that bygone time, until it seemed as if she could have had no existence at all before that never-to-be-forgotten day. All that had gone before was so dim and faded that she could not seize the memory of a single hour out of all her life, until the bright moment in which her heart first fluttered with so sweet an emotion that she had never even tried to still its altered beating, or to coax it back to the old jog-trot pace.

And yet Mr. Catheron was as commonplace a lover as ever said commonplace things in a commonplace way. But then he was Dorothy's first lover, and he had all the benefit of that wondrous glamour which belongs to new emotions kindled in a fresh young heart. His compliments might be dull and hackneyed; but they were the first that had ever brought the warm blushes to Dorothy's cheeks. From him she heard for the first time that hazel eyes and rosy lips are agreeable objects, for the love of which Edward the Confessor himself might be cast to the winds. It was he who informed her that she had dimples, and that dimples were nice things to have. He might be commonplace; but then he did not present himself before Dorothy in his own person. It was not the dissolute, shiftless, penniless sub-lieutenant of marines whom the bailiff's

daughter met in that smoky parkour: it was love, the ever young and ever beautiful; the radiant divinity, beneath whose influence Titania can see perfection in the ass's head of a village joiner; whose breath exhales from the lips of Pyramus whispering through the chink in the wall, and transforms the boy's most vulgar words into the murmurs of a demigod. It was the same divinity who visited Dido in the guise of Æneas, and shone upon Telemachus out of the bewildering eyes of Calypso. What matters the disguise in which the god chooses to veil his divinity? Change as he may, his power is still the same, and is still no part of the shape he bears; but his own, and his own only. Louis la Vallière may limp, but Love is not lame. The shrinking violet may be marked with the small-pox, but Eros is affected by no mortal malady. It is only when the Protean divinity changes his disguise, and skips into the earthly semblance of Athénée de Montespan, or frolics in the ribbon-bound locks of De Fontanges, that the king discovers how his poor penitent Louise was no such dazzling beauty; and then the celestial boy, half-imp, half-angel, enshrines himself in the portly figure of a comely middle-aged widow, and, tired of so many transformations, the divine spirit is content to hold his new shape, and *prim de Maintenon's* eyes shine on her benefactor with a flame that is as steady as it is feeble. Surely, sometimes, when he groaned over his troubles in the agreeable society of his second wife, the mighty Bourbon's fancies must have wandered back to the old, old days when Cupid bore the shape of Mazarin's beautiful niece, and the alias of Love was Mancini.

Dorothy had met the god in a shabby uniform and doubtful varnished boots; but the auréole of his divinity encircles his head, let him appear under what shape he will. If any body had told the bailiff's daughter that the Apollo was better-looking than Gervoise Catheron, that De Lanzun was more elegant, or De Grammont better bred, or Dr. Samuel Johnson better informed, she would only have shrugged her pretty little shoulders in ineffable contempt for that person's bad taste. She was engaged; and to a gentleman. Her little head swam with the intoxication of this last idea. Yes; Edward the Confessor had more to do with it than Mr. Catheron was aware of. He was a gentleman, of an old family. Dorothy had heard enough of old families, and quarterings, and intermarriages, and pedigrees that could be traced back to the dark ages before the Conquest. She had heard all this sort of thing discussed gravely by Mrs. Browning, the housekeeper at the Abbey; and the foolish little heart swelled to bursting as she thought how delicious it would be to change the odious name of Tursgood—a name shared with cousins who were

blacksmiths' apprentices and with uncles who couldn't write—for the high-sounding appellation of Catheron.

That her lover was a poverty-stricken scamp, who borrowed half-sovereigns of Mr. Dobb, and had to be reminded of their loan before he returned them, was a fact that made no impression whatever upon Dorothy's mind. Charles Stuart hiding for hours at a stretch in the branches of an oak; or scudding across country disguised as an agricultural labourer; or crossing the Channel in Captain Tattersall's boat, could scarcely have been the most heroic object, looked upon by uninitiated eyes; but he was King Charles the Second of Great Britain and Ireland nevertheless, and the divinity which hedges even kings who are down in the world encircled him still. So Gervoise Catheron, borrowing half-sovereigns and wearing doubtful boots, was only a prince under a cloud, and bore the stamp of his Saxon descent inscribed in unmistakable characters upon his noble brow; at least, so Dorothy thought; and Dorothy and his creditors were about the only people who did think of Gervoise Catheron. The lieutenant's physiognomy was rather of the Celtic than the Germanic type; and his dark eyes and hair indicated the introduction of southern blood in the line of his Saxon progenitors; but a complexion cannot be expected to last for the best part of a thousand years; and Dorothy concluded any little mental argument she held about her lover's personal appearance by declaring to herself that whatever Edward the Confessor might have been like, Gervoise Catheron was a great deal handsomer than any old Saxon monarch who ever lived upon this earth.

She would like to have told her generous mistress of her engagement; but the lieutenant forbade any such revelation.

"There's a person staying at the Abbey who knows me," Gervoise said; "and if it were to get to her ears, there'd be the deuce to pay; though why there should, or why I should consider *her* in the business when I never get anything out of her, I don't know," concluded the lieutenant, who never was in one mind about the smallest thing for two minutes together, and whose conversation was positively bespattered with dare says and perhapses, and every phrase in the vocabulary indicative of indecision. "However, you'd better not tell her," concluded Mr. Catheron, "because you see you can do that at any time; and as I am so deuced hard-up, it isn't likely we can be married yet awhile. But however dark I may want things kept just now, dear—though why they should be kept dark I don't know—and yet, perhaps it is better; anyhow I mean to act fair and above board with you, Dolly. I call you Dolly after Dolly Varden, you know,—an innkeeper's

daughter, wasn't she ? and in love with a blacksmith's son ? I remember all about it. Yes, dear, I'm not a particularly good fellow ; but I'll be good and true to you, so help me——”

This was quite an invitation to the plump little hand, which flew to his lips like a fat little bird, and was kissed slyly before it went down again. Such conversations as this were carried on in furtive whispers during Mr. Dobb's Sunday evening assemblies ; and the lovers enjoyed each other's society in a corner of the little parlour, and were almost as much isolated in the magic world of their own creation as if the facetious clerk's imitations of Charles Kean and Paul Bedford had been the rustling of forest-leaves murmuring softly in the depths of some impenetrable silver glade.

Mr. Dobb was a great deal too much interested in himself to be acutely conscious of other people's proceedings, and Selina favoured the lovers. She might perhaps be a little inclined to envy Dorothy her aristocratic conquest ; but then the aristocrat was poor, and there seemed little chance of a six-roomed villa and a maid-of-all work for the young couple yet awhile. Mrs. Dobb preached prudence ; but she was rather gratified by the patrician flavour which Gervoise Catheron's presence imparted to her husband's receptions ; and she was inclined to forgive Dorothy for being pretty ; and even went so far as to admit that the bailiff's daughter was rather nice looking ; “though to my taste a pale complexion and regular features are much more interesting,” said Mrs. Dobb, who had a thin face, which looked as if it had been carved out of yellow soap with a penknife, like those wonderful figures which the French painter Prudhon modelled in his inspired boyhood.

Dorothy was happy. Marcia Denison, hearing her little favourite's tripping foot, and watching the varying sunshine in her fresh young face, thought half-wonderingly what a beautiful thing youth was when it could be so bright, even without love. Sometimes, when the evidence of the girl's happiness broke out in some little burst of girlish gaiety, Miss Denison's thoughts shaped themselves in the words of Alfred de Musset, and she would fain have asked her little maid the poet's question :

“Ninon, Ninon, que fais-tu de la vie ?

Comment vis-tu, toi qui n'as pas d'amour ?”

Sometimes she talked to Dorothy of her father's house and her blacksmith consins, half thinking that there must be some rustic lovers lurking in the background, and that a few words of encouragement would win the secret from the pretty little protégée. But the bailiff's daughter spoke of her cousins and

her home acquaintance with a careless freedom that was quite incompatible with the existence of anything like a tender secret in that direction ; and Marcia knew nothing of Mr Dobb's evening parties, for Dorothy had shrunk from telling her mistress of those beer drinking assemblies, which must have seemed such vulgar orgies to Sir Jasper's daughter. So Marcia was fain to believe that it was the brightness of youth, and youth only, that beamed in Dorothy's face.

"It is only when one feels youth gliding away that it seems a sad thing not to be loved," thought Marcia ; who, with her twenty-fourth birthday stealing towards her, felt herself terribly old. She looked at herself sometimes in the glass. No, there were no wrinkles in the pale still face, the dark grey eyes were clear and luminous ; but oh, what a cold light it seemed that sparkled in them, when compared with the sunshine for ever playing in Dorothy's hazel orbs ! what a look of settled sadness was spread like a dusky veil over the face that Marcia beheld when she turned from the contemplation of her joyous little maid to the contemplation of herself ! "Is it any wonder there is a difference between us ?" she thought ; "her father loves her, and she has brothers and sisters and cousins ; while I am quite alone. I can see a picture of my father sometimes as he would look at me if I were dead. 'Poor Marcia, poor girl,' he would say ; 'and one finishes by being like that !—very sad, very unpleasant ;' and then he would shrug his shoulders and stroll away, muttering some quotation from Voltaire or Holbach or Condorcet. Ah, papa, if you had only loved me, I think I could have won you away from Voltaire."

She clasped her hands involuntarily, and suddenly tears sprang up to her eyes, for the random thought brought before her such a vivid vision of what might have been,—a father lured away from the dry logic chopping of the Eyclopédists to listen to the simplest words that ever clothed sublime thoughts in common language.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE WIDOW TEARS HERSELF AWAY.

MARCIA DENISON had never felt more completely alone than she did during the winter months in which the lively widow condescended to waste her splendour on the desert air of Seardsdale Abbey. Whatever fragile ties of companionship there had been between herself and her father had made themselves air and vanished before the advent of Sir Jasper's brilliant visitor. Mrs. Harding could play *cearté* infinitely better than Marcia ; so the Baronet and his daughter no longer spent a nightly hour at the tiny card-table, by the specially luxurious chair which was reserved in each apartment for the master of the Abbey. Marcia's dreamy little songs had been wont to soothe her father to his placid evening slumber ; for there was no time of day or evening which the Baronet did not think profitably employed in a luxurious nap. But he no longer cared to hear "Break, break, break," or "Soft and low," or that tenderest and sweetest song that was ever composed by earthly poet, that plaintive ballad of Longfellow's, in whose mournful music we hear the ripple of the quiet tide as it creeps in and out among the wooden piles, and the solemn booming of the church-bell chiming midnight. Sir Jasper had rather liked these pensive ballads when he and Marcia had dawdled through the long wintry evenings in a pleasant idleness that afforded so much leisure for thought.

"That song of Longfellow's always makes me cry," said the Baronet. "I don't know why we should be lachrymose because some fellow stood on a bridge at midnight when the clock was striking the hour. I've done the same myself on Westminster Bridge after a debate when I had the honour of representing my native county ; but I wasn't sentimental. Westminster Abbey was close at hand ; but the divine *afflatus* must have been a long way off, for I was not inspired. We are a commercial people, Marcia, and I don't suppose we shall ever have another Shakespeare. Not that I regret the fact ; for taking into consideration the fuss we make about *one*, and the way in which we come to grief and insult *one* another every time we attempt to pay him any *post-mortem* civility, from the days of Garrick and Foote downwards, I should imagine that existence would be unendurable if we had *two*. Fortunately, it is not likely : the circumstances of the age are against another William. Your Shakespeare must

begin by holding horses at the doors of a theatre ; and as people don't generally go to the play on horseback nowadays, I can't see how he could get over that. The next best thing for him would be to burst from among the watermen who bawl for your carriage, and get in your way when you are stepping into it ; but unless stupidity in the commonest matters is the sign of a lofty genius, I can't say I've ever met with an incipient bard amongst those gentlemen. No, my dear Marcia, we are a manufacturing people. You may depend upon it that poetry went out when tall chimneys came in. How can Westminster Abbey inspire a man nowadays ? He surveys it with a shiver of horror at the idea of being buried in the neighbourhood of so much soap-boiling. And yet poetry is a very nice thing. That man Longfellow twists a few simple words about a meditative dawdler and a bridge, and the moon and the water and a church-clock, into the simplest rhyme ; and lo ! the hardest wretch who ever read mathematics cannot hear it sung without a choking sensation in his throat and a mist before his eyes. Arrange the words any other way, and they are dull and meaningless ; alter a syllable, and the magical music is broken into discord. So the notes that make ' Hope told a flattering tale ' only want the twist of a clever plagiarist to transform them into a comic Ethiopian melody ; and the ' Old English gentleman ' is only the ' Last rose of summer ' in disguise. So it is, after all, the arrangement that makes the genius. One man finds some celery plants that have outgrown their basket, and we have the crowning glory of Corinthian architecture ; another man looks up and sees the overarching branches of a forest-avenue, and all the cities of the earth are beautified by Gothic temples. And you and I will sit still and enjoy ourselves, my dear, happily conscious that every day a hundred aching brains are racking themselves to find out something for our advantage,—from the amiable philanthropist who devotes his attention to our kitchen-stoves, to the monomaniac who tries to find us the philosopher's stone."

Miss Denison had been very well contented to spend the long evenings and dusky winter afternoons in her father's society. A pleasant familiarity—respectful on her side, cordial on his—had existed between them. The Baronet, who had overlooked his daughter during her sister's lifetime, resigned himself to his destiny now that he found himself thrown upon her for society. He treated her very much as he might have treated any agreeable young lady whom circumstances rendered an inmate of his house ; and Marcia had been one of the most patient companions who ever made a lonely man's home delightful. She had been his antagonist at *ecarté* and had sung her pensive ballads, and had played her dreamy nocturnes and

classic sonatas, her sleepy murmurings of summer seas, whispering in minor arpeggios, her trickling rivulets and fountains, her dawns and twilights and monastic bells, and all the sentimental musings of modern composers, with an untiring desire to please her solitary companion. She had been the most attentive and unwearying of listeners when her father was pleased to air his frivolous fancies ; an intelligent listener too, as the Baronet knew very well, though she rarely ventured to argue with him. In short, they had been almost happy together ; and although she had never been loved by her father, Marcia Denison felt a sharp little twinge, that was almost a pang of jealousy, when the gorgeous widow usurped her place, and assumed the task of amusing Sir Jasper, who was by no means unamusable, and was indeed a very placable sultan, so long as he was allowed to enjoy himself after his own fashion.

But how was it that Mrs. Harding succeeded in pushing Marcia so completely aside, and constituting herself Sir Jasper's chief companion ? How was it that the Baronet found Blanche Harding, the superficial and pretentious, a more agreeable companion than gentle Marcia, whose intelligence was so sweetly tempered by feminine modesty, whose manners were so exquisitely sympathetic and refined ? Marcia, sitting silently on one side of the fire place while Sir Jasper and Mrs. Harding played *ecarté* and talked shallow nonsense on the other, was not slow to perceive whence the charm of the siren was derived. The widow drew her most potent magic from the vanity of her victim, and her highest art consisted in a skilful cultivation of his own weakness. She flattered him. Sir Jasper was mortal, and Sir Jasper liked incense. Mrs. Harding kept the perfumed censer burning as steadily as if it had been the sacred fire which classic vestals watched before the fall of Rhea and the birth of Rome. In every word, in every gesture, in every glance, in every tone, Blanche Harding contrived to convey some breath of the insidious vapour whose enervating influence lulled the Baronet into a delicious trance of self-complacency. The first effort of a clever woman, who wants to make a man madly in love with her, is to make him madly in love with himself. Mrs. Harding advanced very rapidly in this initiatory process ; but she was looking out every day for the triumphant hour in which the Baronet should glide unconsciously from self-complacency into admiration,—the hour in which, instead of murmuring calmly, "Well, I really am a most irresistible fellow, and that is an extremely sensible person ;" he should exclaim, in a rapture of enthusiasm, "Her presence is the light of my soul, and without her life would be a burden !"

It was for this mystical transition that Mrs. Harding watched; but the magic moment was slow to come. Sir Jasper accepted the incense and invited the consumption of more, until, in a metaphorical sense, the widow's arm ached from perpetual swinging of the censer; but Sir Jasper evidently considered the hospitality of the Abbey sufficient recompense for all Blanche Harding's pretty flatteries, and had no idea of offering any better payment for her agreeable adulation. The crowning merit of a clever woman's flattery is the fact that it never seems like flattery; and the unbelieving Baronet accepted every syllable of Mrs. Harding's honeyed discourse, and was in no way conscious that she was anything but a very sensible woman,—a little worldly-wise, of course, and quite capable of pouncing upon any chance of making herself Lady Denison, yet in a general way a really candid creature, with plenty of sound common sense. And then comparing her with his daughter, Sir Jasper found that she was such an enthusiastic and appreciative being. How beautiful it was to see her dark eyes flash with a vivid light, and her splendid countenance brighten with a sudden glory that was almost supernal, as she warmed into enthusiasm with some discourse of her host's, exclaiming at its close, "Ah, Sir Jasper, you should have been an orator! I can imagine nothing since Edmund Burke's speech about Marie Antoinette equal to that little burst of eloquence of yours just now, and yet I'll wager you scarcely know you were eloquent;" or, "Oh, Sir Jasper, if you had only been a barrister! My pet, Brougham, would have had to look to his laurels, I fear; and yet your style is scarcely Brougham's: there is a lightness, a playfulness, a *je ne sais quoi*, a—may I venture to use a slang word?—a *chic*, which is all your own. But I am only a stupid woman, and I dare say I am talking nonsense!" Mrs. Harding would cry, in conclusion, with childlike *naïveté*; but Sir Jasper was wondrously tolerant of this kind of nonsense.

And yet Mrs. Harding was not satisfied. Alone in her own room, she lingered over the brushing of her long black hair. There were tresses which she put away in boxes; but the growing locks were by no means scanty; for there are women who cannot keep their souls unsullied in the conflict of life, but who can yet preserve a handsome parting to their dying day. The people whose hair turns grey, or whose ringlets grow scanty from the tortures of remorse, are not many. Robespierre's bilious constitution had more influence upon his complexion than the blood of all the Girondists; and no doubt the dictator suffered a more terrible visitation in the way of nightmare from the jam-tarts which

he stole in his youth than ever he did from the phantom of Madame Roland.

Mrs. Harding had done many bad things in her life, but she had been very careful of her complexion. She had never consumed the scholar's midnight oil, or impaired her digestion by ill-chosen viands; and the finger of Care had written few lines upon her broad white forehead. The florid widow had been established at Scarsdale Abbey for nearly three months, and her face assumed rather an anxious expression when she looked at herself in the glass. It was the face of a woman who was scarcely likely to take the smallest step in life without a settled purpose, and it was growing day by day into the face of a woman who began to look gloomily forward to the possibility of failure. If Mrs. Harding were a coquette, bent only on demanding perpetual tribute of admiration, and had come to the Abbey with the view to the subjugation of Sir Jasper beneath the influence of her fascinations, surely she had every reason to be content with her success. Mark Antony at his weakest never abandoned himself more completely to the sway of Cleopatra than the cynical Baronet to the charms of his guest. Night after night he basked in the light of her beauty, and was intoxicated by the conversational bon-bons which she so insidiously administered to him. But if on the other hand, the brilliant widow had come to Scarsdale with more serious intentions,—if she wished to make herself mistress of the Baronet's hand and fortune,—she certainly had made no progress whatever, and had good reason to frown moodily at the unprofitable beauty which she contemplated nightly while busy with her hairbrushes.

Sir Jasper was fascinated; but he was cautious. Sir Jasper kissed the yoke of the fair enslaver; but he knew how to take care of himself. When Mrs. Harding's flatteries were sweetest, when the intoxicating drop of intellectual noyeau, or golden water, or maraschino, in the conversational bon-bon, was most delicious to the epicure's palate, prudence, for ever on the watch, prompted Sir Jasper's tongue. He accepted all the pretty attentions which made his evenings so pleasant; but he accepted them under a protest, so artfully conveyed as to be inoffensive. He was an old man, he said; he had arrived at an age when a man could bask in the sunshine of feminine loveliness without fear of fever or sun-stroke.

"For a man of my age, Venus, the implacable goddess, transforms herself into a nursing sister, and Cupid changes his venomous arrow into the spoon that stirs an invalid's messes of beef-tea and barley-water. A man of my age is not entirely a useless twaddler, for upon him lovely woman

can practise and bring to perfection the arts by which she may hereafter subjugate her youthful adorers. It is only at my time of life, when love would be imbecility and marriage an act of dotage, that a man can derive unalloyed enjoyment from feminine society. He may be as eloquent as he pleases in praise of the loveliness that fascinates him, the wit that cheers his declining hours, the tenderness that compassionates his afflictions, and he has no fear that his un-studied phrases will be recited in a witness-box amidst the titter of a crowded court, or form the subject of flippancy and witticism from a popular Q.C."

Thus playfully the Baronet defended himself, even when the widow was most enchanting, and her victim's subjugation most complete. Sometimes Mrs. Harding talked of leaving the Abbey, and the Baronet expressed himself as disconsolate beyond measure at the idea of her departure. "What would Marcia do without her delightful friend?" he exclaimed; "and what would Marcia's papa do without his Spanish ballads and *ecarté*?" Sir Jasper urged that he was a very old man; and that the whims of a very old man should meet with some indulgence from the hands of compassionate Beauty; even though compassionate Beauty was eager to spread her wings and soar to fairer scenes.

"I know that Scarsdale is a kind of modern moated grange," he said; "and that you must be very often weary, weary, and wish your dismal entertainers dead, even if you don't wish yourself in that disadvantageous position; but, if you can endure us a little longer, be merciful, and furl your wings at our hearth for a week or two before you flutter away to the other butterflies."

Of course Mrs. Harding protested that she had been unspeakably happy at the dear old Abbey. Every place she visited was 'dear' and 'old' in the widow's florid vocabulary. She had many engagements for the spring, and she had brought all kinds of disgrace upon herself, and had offended troops of friends by her lengthened stay at Scarsdale; but if dear Sir Jasper said she was to stay another week, she could not resist his flattering request, and she must go on offending people, and stay at any hazard.

This little business had been gone through four or five times, and the quaintly-cropped yew-trees in Marcia's old fashioned garden were swaying to and fro in the shrill March winds, when Mrs. Harding found out, after many nights of moody contemplation in the glass, that she really could not prolong her delightful visit any further, for that a dear friend, residing in the neighbourhood of Maida Vale, whom she had promised to visit early in January, would not be put off any

longer. "If my friend were not an invalid, I don't think I could tear myself away even now," the widow murmured, with a plaintive sigh; "but it is duty rather than pleasure that takes me away from you, dearest Marcia. You will not see my name in your *Post*, Sir Jasper, at any of the great parties of the season; I shall be sitting beside a sick couch, and dawdling away the quiet hours in a darkened room. My utmost gaiety will be an occasional drive round the park. And oh, how I shall remember our happy evenings here, Marcia!" exclaimed the widow, seizing Miss Denison's listless hand, and vainly inviting that young lady to join her in a gush.

Marcia had not pressed the widow to remain, and did not utter any lamentations when her guest's departure grew imminent. She had never liked Mrs. Harding; she had liked her less from the day on which the widow had expressed herself in vague denunciation of George Pauncefort. There were times when Miss Denison had occasion to struggle with an uncomfortable feeling about this brilliant widow,—a feeling which was very much like detestation.

"I shall be a better Christian when she is gone," thought Marcia. "How is it that papa can accept her odious flatteries, and not perceive how false and hollow she is? He cannot believe St. Matthew, and yet he will take every word of this horrible woman's for gospel truth."

When once Mrs. Harding had announced that her invalid friend in Maida Vale could wait no longer, she lost no time in putting her threat of departure into execution. She talked of her departure during breakfast; announced after breakfast that she was going to devote the day to the packing of her trunks, in order to leave Searsdale early on the morrow. She watched Sir Jasper rather closely as she talked of this packing business; but the Baronet did not flinch. He offered her the services of his daughter's maid, and begged her to consider his entire household at her disposal.

"In this instance it is an act of sublime abnegation to speed the parting guest," said Sir Jasper; "but since you are bent on leaving us, we are bound to smooth the way for your comfortable departure. When you are tired of the gay world—ah, I forgot; an invalid lady, to be sure," murmured the Baronet, as Mrs. Harding was about to interrupt him. "When you have tried another species of moated grange, you may be resigned to the idea of coming back to us; in the early autumn, perhaps, when every break in the wood is a Creswick, and every cornfield a Linnell. Come to us in the autumn if you can. You won't be able to stand your invalid friend very long, depend upon it. The brightest spirit will droop in a perpetual atmosphere of beef-tea; and there will be

time for a round of visits between this and the autumn. You can pay off all your debts, or at any rate make a composition with your creditors, at the rate of a week in the month, say ; and you can return to us when the reapers are reaping early in among the bearded barley, which doesn't rhyme with early, by-the-bye, any more than Oliver Goldsmith's 'kay' rhymed with 'be.' Yes, let us hope you will come back to us ; let us hope it, even if you don't come. If Adam and Eve had been allowed to anticipate a possible return to Eden, half the bitterness of that first great ejectionment would have been taken away."

When the Baronet retired to his favourite retreat under the shadow of Neptune, Mrs. Harding went to her rooms, and began the grand process of packing those glittering moires and lustrous velvets which had gratified her host's feeling for colour during the winter evenings, as well as the pretty cashmeres and foulards in which she had burst brightly upon him every morning, in a carefully-studied dishabille. The widow's brow was very moody while she folded all these trappings of feminine warfare, and put away a perfect arsenal of delicate implements by which she was wont to effect the decorative portion of her toilet. More than once in the process of her packing Mrs. Harding happened to find herself in need of masculine assistance. She wanted *Times* Supplements to lay at the top of her boxes ; and with Sir Jasper's entire household at her disposal, she preferred to appeal to Sir Jasper himself. She invaded the Baronet's retreat with many apologies, and a great deal of ceremony ; and while Sir Jasper abandoned the perusal of Mr. Newman's *Phases of Faith* to hunt obscure shelves for old newspapers, she wandered into gushing lamentations about the necessity of departure. But the Baronet's prudence did not desert him even in this trying moment, and he handed her the Supplements as coolly as if he were selling waste-paper to a Roxborough buttermilk.

"How kind you are, and how I shall miss you, Sir Jasper !" murmured the widow sadly ; "and what a lost creature I shall seem when I have no longer your powerful intellect to help me whenever I am at a loss !" Mrs. Harding's manner might have implied that the *Times* Supplements just handed her by the Baronet involved a service which nobody else upon earth could have performed for her. "And yet," she added, looking at the Baronet contemplatively, in her pet attitude, and breathing a profound sigh, "perhaps it's a very good thing I am going away, for I have felt my opinions growing terribly unsettled lately ; and Heaven only knows what would have become of me, morally speaking, if I had stayed much longer. Do you remember what Coventry Patmore says ? 'Take heed

what his religion is, for yours ere long will be the same.' That was said to a woman about the man whom she was going to marry; but what can be stronger than the influence of a friend whom we respect and admire?" The widow dropped her voice at the last words, and executed a little manœuvre with her eyelashes, which was the next best thing to blushing. "Yes, Sir Jasper," she continued, in her most pensive tone, "I am glad I am going; you have been a dangerous companion for me."

The Baronet simpered. The weakest side of his character was undergoing a sharp attack. Mrs. Harding was something like the warrior king who thought that Paris was worth a mass, and would have written herself down a Voltairean without a moment's hesitation, if by that small sacrifice she might have attained any tangible advantage. The bon-bon was peculiarly seductive; but even in swallowing it, the Baronet was strong.

"You undervalue your own force of intellect, my dear Mrs. Harding," he said; "your mind is too powerful to be influenced by mine. It is I who have occasion to fear you. At present I believe nothing and am resigned. If I listened to you, I should believe a little and—be miserable."

Throughout that day Sir Jasper was fluttered in his retirement by the incursions of the brilliant widow. She wanted adhesive labels for her trunks, and she imagined the Baronet's study the place of all places where to find them. She wanted to know all about the trains; and Sir Jasper was the only person whose intellect could cope with the Rhadamanthine Bradshaw. And on every visit to the library there was a little conversation—now pensive, now playful. But when Mrs. Harding had concluded her packing and dressed for dinner, her face was still clouded, and there was a hard dissatisfied expression about her mouth which argued ill for the result of her long visit.

She dressed herself in the dark silk in which she intended to travel next day. It was only four o'clock when her toilet was completed, and she stood looking out of her window in a listless attitude, with a countenance which was very different from the bright face that had so lately beamed upon Sir Jasper Denison.

"Would it be so very high a prize, after all, to be mistress of so many trees and so much grass," she thought, "and to hold a certain rank among a few stuck-up country families? The Catherons were greater people, once upon a time, than any family within twenty miles of Roxborough; but I dare not own to the name of Catheron."

It was a fine bright afternoon, and the rooks were rejoicing

noisily in the chill sunshine. After standing some time in gloomy contemplation of the landscape, Mrs. Harding turned impatiently away from the window.

"I'll go out," she muttered; "perhaps a little rapid walking in the fresh air will put me in a better temper."

She wrapped herself in a large velvet mantle with loose sleeves that enveloped her bare arms to the wrist, and she put on a Spanish hat and feather which were infinitely becoming to her bold beauty. She had seen nothing of Marcia all that day; and even now she did not seek Miss Denison, but went straight to a little door leading out upon the terrace, and walked across the broad lawn and the great deer-park, and far away into the woods.

Something—scarcely a definite purpose, but rather an irresistible fascination—led the widow towards the romantic spot in which Mr. Pauncefort's habitation was hidden. She walked briskly along the narrow winding path, with the wind blowing round her, and her velvet mantle wrapped closely about her; but within a hundred yards of the Hermitage, at a point where two pathways diverged into the depth of the woodland, she stopped suddenly, arrested by the sight of a little group in the distance.

It was a group of three figures—Marcia, Mr. Pauncefort, and Dorothy Tursgood, whose bright scarlet cloak and basket made her look like a bouncing Red Ridinghood. Mrs. Harding drew aside into the shadow of the trees and watched the distant figures. Sir Jasper's tenant and Sir Jasper's daughter were in the act of shaking hands, while Dorothy stood meekly by.

"Very cordial indeed, Miss Denison," muttered the widow spitefully. "I understand now why you and I cannot get on together. I am disliked because I am no friend of Mr. Pauncefort." Then after a pause the watcher thought, "Has he told her anything? No; he is too proud to speak. He would perish with his secret untold. I have reason to know how much he will suffer for the gratification of his pride."

George Pauncefort and Marcia lingered for a few minutes after they had shaken hands. The tenant of the Hermitage had accompanied Miss Denison in one of her charitable missions to the village. They loitered talking, and the two voices rang out upon the evening air, the man's deep and sonorous, the woman's very clear and sweet; and then George Pauncefort lifted his hat, little Dorothy dropped a curtsy, and Marcia and her attendant walked away briskly by a pathway that branched off in the direction of the Abbey.

By keeping straight on, Mrs. Harding must come face to face with Sir Jasper's tenant. She kept straight on, watch-

ing the countenance of the man who was walking towards her without seeing her. The tenant's face had been very bright as he parted from Marcia, but it darkened little by little as he came nearer to the widow; and when he looked up suddenly, startled by the rustling of her silken garments, it was the face of a man who has very little to hope for on this earth. It darkened still more as he recognised Mrs. Harding. "You!" he muttered, and then bowing stiffly, would have walked on.

The widow stopped him. There was a reckless audacity in her manner of looking at him, in the tone of her voice when she spoke to him, that was almost like the insolence of some demoniac creature defying the superior being who has trampled upon it.

"A meeting with me is very unwelcome just now, I dare say, Mr. — Pauncefort," she said sneeringly. The little pause she made before addressing him by the name he bore at Scarsdale told as plainly as the plainest words that Pauncefort was not his real name, and that his real name was known to her.

"A meeting with you any where, under any circumstances, must always be unwelcome to me," answered Sir Jasper's tenant, still trying to pass the widow, and with his passage still barred by her portly figure and spreading draperies.

"But peculiarly unwelcome this afternoon, I know," she said.

"Peculiarly unwelcome this afternoon. Too strong a contrast is always unpleasant."

"And the contrast between Marcia Denison and me is very strong, I suppose."

"Thank God, yes!"

"What reason have you to be thankful about her?" cried the widow; "she is nothing to you, and never can be any thing to you."

"She is a great deal to me. She is the woman who, when my respect for womanhood had perished altogether, as I thought, taught me that womanhood can still be beautiful. She has taught me that a woman can be charming, and yet not a hypocrite; handsome, and not a shallow coquette. She has taught me the possibility of happy husbands, secure in the love of faithful wives; of mothers who do not desert their sick children; of sisters in whose girlish confidences the devil has no reason to rejoice. Caroline!" cried George Pauncefort suddenly, "why do you force yourself upon me? I have spent the best years of my lifetime among the wildest and dreariest regions that civilised man ever penetrated, in the vain hope

that I might forget your face, and the time when it was familiar to me. I come back, worn in health, broken in spirit, to find some little spot where I might rest forgotten under the shadow of English foliage, within the reach of English faces to watch me when I am dying,—and even here in this one corner of the earth, where I am resigned to live and die, alike forgotten by all who know me or my kindred,—even here you pursue me ; even here the bitterest memories of my life are revived more vividly than ever by the sight of your face. Have I ever done you any unkindness, or denied you any privilege ? ”

“ Oh, no,” answered Mrs. Harding, in the same sneering tone which she had used before ; “ you have been very generous—with the money which you do not want. If you have spared those who injured you, you have spared them for the gratification of your own pride, not out of mercy for them. I do not think there is any cause for gratitude on my part.”

“ Perhaps not,” answered the tenant sadly ; “ I have spared my pride : and I have spared my name. *That* has not been dragged in the dust. Now let me pass. I shall leave this place to-morrow ; I will not run the risk of meeting you again.”

“ There will be no danger of your doing so ; I am going away myself early to-morrow. You need not leave your favourite retreat ; you need not desert your new friends ; you may still fetch and carry groceries and distribute tracts for the Dorcas Society—and Miss Denison.”

“ How dare you mention her name with a sneer ! ”

“ How can I help sneering at the sentimental parting I witnessed just now ? ”

“ Caroline,” cried George Pauncefort, “ I did not think that even fifteen years’ liberty to do wrong could transform you into such a demon ! ”

The widow’s right arm was hanging loosely by her side ; and, before she had time to resist him, Sir Jasper’s tenant seized her wrist and flung the wide velvet sleeve back from the bare white arm, across which the scar was visible, *unconcealed* by band or bracelet. He held her arm for a moment, looking at it, and then let it drop.

“ Forgive me,” he said ; “ I began to think I was the victim of some hellish conspiracy. And now, if you have anything to say to me, speak quickly, and let me go.”

“ I have nothing to say, except that I am going to London, and shall call on Mr. Williams, or write to him.”

“ He will be as well prepared to see you or hear from you as he has always been. Good-afternoon.”

“ Good-afternoon ”

Once more Sir Jasper's tenant raised his hat, more frigidly respectful in his gesture than when he had saluted Miss Denison. The widow watched him as he walked away. Then she looked at her watch, and, finding it long past six, hurried back to the Abbey.



CHAPTER XVII.

DID HE LOVE HER?

WHEN the widow had departed, a pleasant calm descended upon Marcia Denison's life. Once more she was her father's chief companion in the lonely evenings. The Baronet was, in a general way, resigned to everything that could possibly happen to him, except physical pain or personal inconvenience, and he did not give utterance to any lamentations upon the loss of his brilliant visitor.

"I shall enjoy my Ettys more now that she is gone," the Baronet murmured complacently, as he settled himself in the yellow drawing-room after dining *tête-à-tête* with his daughter. "Those gaudy dresses of hers were the death of my pictures, and her flesh latterly has not been up to the mark. There has been a woolliness about her cheeks, and a want of feeling in her chin, which considerably deteriorated my enjoyment of her society. There is more truth in your mezzotints, my dear Marcia; and that ivory whiteness of yours, if produced by art, would be a miracle. Your eyes are not quite up to the Grenze standard, but they are very fine, and the modelling of the eyelids is really charming."

The widow's back once fairly turned, the treacherous Baronet lost no time in writing to his tenant.

"DEAR PAUNCEFORT," wrote the traitor,—*"she is gone. I found it impossible to hasten her departure without esclandre, so allowed her to take her own time about it. I'm sorry you don't approve of her antecedents, for she is really a very agreeable woman. Marcia and she have not hit it very well together, and there has been a kind of tacit avoidance of each other on the part of both women, though I did not communicate the contents of your letter to my daughter.*

"Come and see me. I languish for a little vigorous conversation upon subjects that are worth talking about, if there

is anything in the world really worth talking about. I am enervated by the perpetual society of women, and am weary to sickness of my own thoughts. Come, dear Pauncefort; you will find your old place waiting for you, and two stupid people brightened by your coming. Always yours,

"JASPER DENISON."

"I don't believe he is a scoundrel, whatever the widow may say," thought the Baronet, as he folded and sealed his letter. "She is prejudiced, I dare say. Met him in early life, perhaps, when he was better off, and laid siege to him with a view to matrimonial arrangements, and found him cautious. A widow never forgives a man for being cautious; and although I don't know when the estimable Harding departed this life, I should think from the perfection to which the brilliant Blanche has brought her art, that she has been a widow for a long time,—indeed, if such a thing were practicable, I should be inclined to believe she had been born a widow. However, I'll talk to Pauncefort about her."

Sir Jasper's tenant answered the friendly letter in as friendly a tone; but he was by no means prompt in his acceptance of his landlord's invitation. For a long time—all through the month of April and far into the month of May—Marcia saw nothing of the African traveller in her afternoon walks. He was away, Dorothy told her,—away on a pedestrian excursion, with a knapsack on his shoulder, and the mongrel cur for his sole companion. And Miss Denison, passing by the break in the wood where she had so often met him, was fain to confess to herself that she missed him very much, and that her woodland rambles seemed very dreary without him.

"My life has been so friendless and empty, that it is scarcely strange that I should cling to this one friend," she thought, sadly.

And then, having once made for herself a valid excuse for giving George Pauncefort such an important place in her thoughts, Marcia found herself thinking of him very frequently. In all her life he had borne part. She had no favourite books whose choicer passages had not been freely discussed in the long autumnal evenings, or the winter walks between the park and the village: she had no music that was not more or less associated with him, and his keen appreciation of all that was grandest and highest in it. To her father, the trickling arpeggios and treble tremolos of a modern nocturne were all-sufficient: but George Pauncefort had a higher taste, and a keener sense of all that is grandest in music: and for his gratification she had searched for dusty volumes of the

classic composers, and had been content to practise sedulously in the morning, in order that she might delight her father's guest in the evening. In art, as in music, she had found his taste of a higher order than Sir Jasper's, and they had sided together against the Baronet in many a pleasant argument about Vandervelde and Bakhuysen, Reynolds and Romney, Cuyp and Potter, Watteau and Laueret, and all the great painters of the past and present. In so narrow a circle as Marcia Denison's, a figure once admitted must needs become a very prominent one: and it was only when George Pouncefort had departed on his vagabond wanderings that she discovered how very much he had been to her.

"Why is he so capricious and fitful in his intercourse with us?" she thought. "He likes us; there can be no doubt of that; for I am sure he is the last man in the world to affect a friendship which he does not feel. And we have been so intimate: a friend of twenty years' standing could scarcely seem more thoroughly at home by our fireside than he has done. And yet all at once he goes away, and we neither hear nor see anything of him for months together."

It was not quite two months yet since Miss Denison had met George Pouncefort on her way to the village, but it seemed so long. Thinking over his conduct very often,—thinking of many things which cannot be shaped into common words, or yet transcribed upon this common page,—thinking of chance accents in his voice, of glances so brief that it was almost difficult to decide whether they had really been, or had only been imagined by herself,—thinking of him more constantly than she was aware, Marcia could only come to one conclusion about him: he liked her—very much—he—!

Sitting by herself in the May sunshine, looking pensively out at the park, a crimson flush flew over Marcia's face, like the reflection of a glowing sunset, as she shaped this unfinished thought. Was it not something more than friendly liking which she had seen in George Pouncefort's face sometimes when they parted in the wood? How the still evening hour came back to her; with the faint pressure of his hand; the low glinting light between the trunks of the trees; the distant cawing of the rooks! How it all came back to her, and what a tender sweetness there was in the recollection,—a rapture deeper than any joy she had ever known before,—a tumultuous delight that carried her away from the common earth!

She clasped her hands before her face to hide those crimson blushes.

"And this is what happiness is like!" she thought. "I

do not wonder that it comes only once in a lifetime,—in some sad lives not at all.”

And then, seized with a sudden terror, she asked herself, “Is it true,—is it really true? Can it be true that some one loves me at last?”

The doubt lasted only a moment. We may mistake paste for a diamond, or a copy for a Rembrandt: but we can never mistake a diamond for paste, or a Rembrandt for a copy. So with love: the worthless tinsel may sometimes seem like gold: the pure gold can never seem like tinsel. Inexperienced as Marcia was, she knew that George Pauncefort loved her, and that some powerful motive kept him silent.

“He is poor, and I am rich,” she thought; “that is the secret of his capricious conduct. He will sacrifice his happiness to his pride, and he will never speak. I know now how proud he is; for I can remember his face that day when he spoke of his native county,—the neglected garden of his old home. Ah, what happiness if my worthless money could restore the place he loves, and build up the name that has fallen!”

Like most people who have never known what it is to want money, Marcia Denison was very apt to undervalue that useful commodity: but when she thought of what her fortune might do for George Pauncefort, she began to fancy that it was a grand thing to be rich, after all.

But would he ever accept her money? would he ever give her the opportunity of helping him to regain his lost position? He had been away nearly two months: and Dorothy, who was always well informed about affairs at the Hermitage, told her mistress that Mr. Pauncefort's man did not know where his master was, or when he might be expected home.

“And oh, Miss Marcia,” exclaimed Dorothy, in conclusion, “when I went to see my grandmother the other night, Mr. Milward was in the kitchen, and talking about his master's being away so long. He said it gave him the horrors sometimes to think of Mr. Pauncefort tramping, and tramping, and tramping quite alone among the wildest and most solitary places, very often long after dark, and in all kinds of dreadful weather; and sometimes, Mr. Milward said, he felt almost afraid to take up the newspaper, for fear he should read the account of a body found somewhere, washed away by a rising tide, or killed by a fall from a crag, or smothered in the mud of some horrible marsh. But oh, Miss Marcia, how pale you look!” cried Dorothy; “and how silly of me to talk about these dreadful things!”

Marcia blushed, ashamed of having betrayed so much emotion, even before the eyes of guileless Dorothy; but thought

the little maid was so deeply in love herself, she did not recognise the tokens of the tender passion in her dignified young mistress. To Dorothy's mind Mr. Pauncefort was a very elderly person, for whom it was impossible to entertain any warmer feeling than a respectful compassion. But upon Marcia this speech of Dorothy's had a profound effect. Her imagination—a hundred times more vivid than the imagination of the valet—seized upon the faint sketch suggested by him, and filled in all the details of a horrible picture, which haunted her sleeping or waking.

From that hour there was no change in the sky which Marcia Denison did not think of with reference to the lonely wanderer far away among careless strangers, with no better friend than a ragamuffin dog. There was no dark night under whose starless canopy she did not fancy him, alone upon a dangerous track, careless of the perils that hemmed him in,—reckless of the life that gave him so little happiness. Sometimes, standing at an open window, long after the quiet household had been hushed in sleep, she was carried away by the vividness of her fancies, and saw him battling against the driving wind upon some craggy mountain-slope, as distinctly as if the woodland landscape had been reft asunder, and that other scene revealed beyond. Sometimes, subdued completely beneath the dominion of this thought, she would stretch her arms towards the distant figure, with a gesture full of imploring love, and cry aloud,—

“Oh, come back to me, come back to me! Why is your pride so cruel? Why do we both suffer so much useless misery?”

From the moment in which she had first confessed to herself that she was beloved, there had been no shadow of doubt in her mind. She knew that he loved her, and that it was love for her which had driven him away from his peaceful shelter. Humble though her estimate of her own merits, her own charms, she never paused to ask herself whether she was worthy of this man's love. It was no question for reasoning. It had come to her as the rain comes to the flowers. Revealed to her by a thousand evidences in themselves too small to be remembered, she scarcely could have told how she had discovered the delicious secret. She knew that he loved her; but she did not know why she knew it, and was content to believe that of which she had no better proof than her own conviction.

May melted into June, and Marcia thought “he will come back in June.” But the last flowers upon the hawthorn bushes withered; the dog-roses unfolded their opal leaves; it was midsummer, and still he had not returned. Sir Jasper

grumbled sorely at having no one but his daughter to talk to and yet steadily set his face against any communication with the outraged country gentry, who did not recognise the Baronet's right to nurse his grief or indulge his eccentricity when the duties of society demanded that he should give dinner-parties. Dorothy told her mistress that Mr. Pauncefort's valet was getting really alarmed; and Marcia's heart sank with the tidings. These unsentimental people rarely are frightened unless there is serious cause for fear; and the thought of the man-servant's uneasiness had a terrible influence upon Marcia. When she went out alone now, her footsteps led her almost involuntarily towards that entrance to the wood which was nearest the Hermitage, and by which it was likely Mr. Pauncefort would return, if he ever returned. Yes, it had come to that now. It was an open question whether he would ever come back—whether the dark face would ever look down at her again; with unspeakable affection instinct in its every look; with so many transitions of expression, but with not one that was not tempered by love for her.

"Oh, come back to me, come back to me!" cried her heart, as she wandered alone in the shadowy pathways, where the wild-roses bloomed unheeded. "Come back to me!" cried her heart every day and every hour, as her lips cried sometimes in the dead night when there was none to hear her. Her love strengthened with every hour of his absence; for there is no love so profound as that which is developed in an atmosphere of terror. She thought of him so often now as of something that was lost to her—the only friend of her life, who by a dismal fatality had been taken away from her in the hour when first she knew how much she was beloved. "It is my fate," she thought, sometimes; "I have never known what it is to be precious to any living creature; and now the one friend who would have cherished me is taken away. Her silent sorrow was very bitter; but she was accustomed to suffer and make no sign. Her fingers never touched the keys of her piano without the memory of *his* delight in certain passages of her music coming back to her like a sharp pain; she never sang one of her simple ballads without recalling how *he* had been moved by their plaintive tenderness. And yet she sang and played to her father every evening; and the Baronet never divined that it was a mental anguish, and not a physical languour, under the influence of which his daughter drooped and grew paler day by day.

The family medical man was sent for, and administered tonics; but no tonics could shut from her mind the picture of that lonely wanderer with whom her heart went forth into the

dreary night ; and Sir Jasper began to be concerned, in a gentlemanly way, for his only daughter's health.

June warmed into July, and storm-laden clouds hung heavily over the woody glades and hollows of Scarsdale. For a week Dorothy had paid no dutiful visit to the deaf old housekeeper at the Hermitage, and for a week Marcia had received no tidings of her father's tenant. She shrank with a proud reserve from making any inquiry about him, and endured the new anguish of suspense as bravely and as quietly as she had borne all the sorrows of her loveless girlhood.

She wandered from the park to the wood in the still, oppressive afternoon. She had left the house with no settled purpose, but only because the quiet of her room had become intolerable to her. She was quite free to wander where she pleased ; for Sir Jasper beguiled a considerable portion of his time in placid slumber during this threatening weather.

"I know that a storm is coming, and shall do my best to dodge it," said the Baronet. "If I can doze in my arm-chair, serenely unconscious of the avenging elements, the avenging elements may have their fling. I dare say they will take it out of my oaks or my haymakers. The sleeper is an unassailable being who may defy creation. An earthquake can scarcely affect him ; he will only awake somewhere else."

The storm-clouds had brooded so long above the woods that people had grown careless of the expected tempest, and Marcia wandered deep into the wood without any thought of danger. She had penetrated beyond the neighbourhood of the Hermitage into a shadowy glade, where the fern grew wild and high, and where the spreading branches made a dense roof of foliage that shut out the leaden sky. It was a spot in which she had spent many lonely summer afternoons long ago in her childhood, with a book for her companion, and a big shaggy dog for her protector. It was a spot into whose solemn depths she had not penetrated since her return from the Continent ; and the memory of her solitary childhood came sharply back to her as she entered the familiar glade.

"In all the world there is no face but his which I have ever seen look brighter for the love of me," she thought, remembering her father's profound indifference, her sister's caressing patronage, and even little Dorothy's grateful affection, which was at best too much like the frisky fidelity of a frivolous lap-dog to supply the void in a lonely woman's heart. "In all the world there is no voice but his that ever trembled as it spoke to me. Shall I ever see his face or hear his voice again ?"

She stopped suddenly ; for close beside her path—almost at her feet—there lay the figure of a man half-buried among the

broken fern, lying face downward, with his head resting on his folded arms.

Dorothy would have recognised the shabby shooting-coat, the dark tumbled hair. Marcia knew by some instinct which took no aid from sight that it was George Pouncefort who was lying at her feet. Her heart grew cold as she looked at the quiet figure. Alive—or dead, he was found.

But in a moment he had sprung to his feet, erect, and with his hands outstretched to meet hers. Her faint cry of surprise had startled him like a discharge of artillery close at his elbow. She gave him her hands freely, and suffered them to rest in his strong grasp. In her deep delight at seeing him once more, she forgot that no word had passed between them to make them any more than common friends. She almost forgot that they were any thing except affianced lovers, she had thought of him so much, and she knew so well that he loved her. If her belief in his affection had needed any confirmation, the light in his pale thin face as he looked at her might have confirmed it. She saw the supernal radiance, and had time to think about it while George Pouncefort held her hands in his, too deeply moved for speech.

"And papa can doubt in the divinity of a God," she thought, "when human affection has only to be tolerably free from the leaven of human selfishness in order to become almost divine."

Marcia was the first to speak.

"I began to think you were never coming back to us." (Ah, how sweet those two common words "to us" sounded from her lips: almost like the promise of a home!) "I am so glad to see you!"

"And I am so glad you are glad."

He released her hands, and they strolled onwards side by side, with the fern rustling round them as they walked along the narrow trackway that had been trodden through it. Marcia made no attempt to conceal her pleasure in this meeting; there were so many reasons for her frankness; and not the least among them was the shabby coat, which, with something of Dorothy's simplicity, Miss Denison accepted as the outward and visible sign of George Pouncefort's poverty. He was poor, and his youth was gone. He was not a man to be inflated into foppish pomposity by the evidence of a woman's friendship: and then she believed in him so implicitly.

While they were walking slowly side by side—silent for the moment, for there are joys too deep for eloquence—a distant peal of thunder startled them from their thoughtful silence.

"It is coming," cried Sir Jasper's tenant; "I have been expecting this storm for the last four days. You must hurry home, Miss Denison; or else—but I dare say there will be time for you to get home. Will you take my arm? we shall get along better so. Can you walk fast?"

"As fast as you please."

They hurried to the opening in the wood by which Marcia had diverged from the beaten path. Vivid flashes of lightning shot in upon them from between the foliage overhead: and the rattling thunder-peals seemed to shake the ground beneath their hastening feet. As they emerged from the glade into the pathway, there was a sudden pattering upon the leaves, and the rain came down as it does come sometimes in a thunderstorm, to the terror of farmers whose hay is not carried, or whose stacks are unthatched.

They were within a quarter of a mile of the Hermitage, and the Abbey was two miles off: so there could be little question as to the refuge which Marcia must seek from the torrents that were beating down the leaves and flooding the underwood.

"You can take shelter in my cottage," said Mr. Pauncefort, "and I will send my servant to the Abbey for the carriage. It is quite impossible for you to go home on foot in this weather."

Marcia assented without hesitation; and in ten minutes more she was safely sheltered in the old-fashioned parlour where Sir Jasper's tenant spent so much of his cheerless life. Dame Tursgood, summoned from the back premises with some difficulty, removed the young lady's dripping mantle, and made a hasty fire on the broad hearth. When he had seen this done, and Miss Denison seated comfortably in the big easy-chair by the fire, with her hat off, and her loosened hair hanging about her shoulders as wet as a naiad's, Mr. Pauncefort went away to despatch a messenger to the Abbey. He paused for a moment in the little stone passage before calling his servant.

"Shall I go myself?" he thought. "It would be better, perhaps; and a wet walk would not hurt *me*."

But Sir Jasper's tenant did not go himself. He despatched his servant, and then went slowly back to the parlour. What wonderful influence upon a man's destiny these small questions have sometimes!

He went back to the woman who loved him: he went back to his fate.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MISS DENISON'S HUMILIATION.

SIR JASPER'S tenant went slowly back to the dusky chamber where Marcia was sitting, with the yellow light from the newly-kindled logs shining upon her. The light shone upon a pale thoughtful face; a very sad face, as it turned towards George Pauncefort.

The low old-fashioned parlour, usually as perfect as a Dutch picture in the order of its quaint arrangement, to-day wore a strange aspect. Open packing-cases yawned wide at one end of the room, and the centre table was piled high with books that had been taken from the worm-eaten oaken shelves; a few wonderful, but rather dingy-looking engravings by Albert Durer had been removed from the walls, and were piled on one of the smaller tables. Only thus could look the room of a man who was about to remove his treasures.

"Is he going to sell his books and pictures?" wondered Marcia; and then her face grew paler, as she thought, "Perhaps he is going away."

The idea set her heart beating tumultuously; it had been such an irregularly-disposed heart lately. Going away! There was blank despair in the very thought. And yet an hour or two before, when she had fancied him dead and buried in some obscure resting-place, amongst people who had never known his name, she would have considered it happiness to be told that he was alive and well in the remotest valley that ever was sheltered by the shadow of the Himalayas.

She, who was so reserved towards every one else, had little reserve where he was concerned. She trusted him as she had never trusted any one upon earth; she believed in him as a man whose truth and goodness were only less infallible than the truth and goodness of Heaven.

"You are going to leave Scarsdale, Mr. Pauncefort?" she said, as he closed the door behind him.

"Yes, Miss Denison," he answered sadly.

He did not go towards the hearth where she was seated, though the yellow light of the logs made that one spot bright and cheery. A greyish darkness brooded ominously outside the latticed casement; rich brown shadows filled

the panelled room, making a picture for a modern Rembrandt, if there existed such a person ; with heaven's own cloud and sunshine melted into liquid colour, and always ready for his brush.

George Pauncefort did not approach his guest, though the home-like aspect of that little bit of the room might have invited him. He dropped wearily into a chair near the door by which he had entered, and sat with his face half-hidden in the shadow of the pile of books.

"I am sorry you are going away," Marcia said, after a pause ; "but it is only for a short time, I hope ; and yet you would scarcely disarrange your books unless you were leaving us for good."

"You are right, Miss Denison. I am going for good—or ill, perhaps. What a meaningless phrase that is, by-the-bye,—going away for good ! Does any body ever go any where for good ? I sometimes fancy that every step a man takes in life only carries him farther away from the chance of happiness ; and that the Moslem alone is wise, who sits placidly upon his carpet and waits for his destiny."

"You are talking like papa," answered Marcia very gravely. "I should be very sorry if you were to learn to think like him."

"There are times when a thick darkness closes round a man's pathway, Miss Denison, and shuts out all the stars that have lighted his life. I am groping bewildered in such a darkness. I try still to hold by some guiding principle ; but I am horribly shaken—I am horribly tempted. I have been reading the Book of Job lately. How easily I can believe in him ! how well I can understand him ! I fancy him sometimes in the dead of the night, as I sit alone in the chief room of some wayside inn, with a pistol-case within a few yards of me—so much alone that, if I were to be found dead the next morning I should be found by strangers, who would only wonder at me as some melancholy lunatic who had strayed away from his keepers : so much alone that, if the news of my death were cried aloud all over the universe, there would not be a creature any the more sorrowful for the hearing of it."

"Mr. Pauncefort !"

There was a world of reproach in the tone.

"Oh, Miss Denison, I beg your pardon ; but that is understood, of course," cried George Pauncefort, bitterly. "You would be sorry that one more self-murderer had gone red-handed to his doom. It is your *métier* to be sorry for sinners and poor people ; but that is only Christian-like compassion, and not real human sorrow. There is scarcely a ruffian who

ever went out of the debtor's-door who has not been regretted more truly by some one or other than ever I shall be regretted. Knowing this, can you wonder that I have learnt to recognise the sublimity of Job's patience? It is so easy to curse God, and die!"

"Mr. Pauncefort, you are breaking my heart!"

The words sounded almost like a cry. The tenant's moody face flushed and changed for a moment as he turned towards Marcia. He had been looking at the ground before, as with a kind of dogged determination not to look at her. The change was only momentary, and he bent his eyes down again with the same gloomy expression.

"I am a brute," he said, "to pain you with my troubles; but I have seen you listen so patiently to whining stories of unpaid rent and rheumatism. No unhappy wretch who ever lived in hourly fear of the bailiff's coming was ever more homeless than I am: and the pain that keeps me awake at night is a sharper torture than rheumatism."

"I am very sorry for you," said Marcia softly. There was a tenderness in the tone not to be mistaken for any conventional expression of compassion. George Pauncefort's heart thrilled at the sound of that tender music; but he kept his face still in shadow; and Marcia, looking towards that part of the room where he sat, saw only a motionless figure, dark and gloomy as was the brooding sky without and the dusky chamber within.

"You are kind to be sorry for me," answered Mr. Pauncefort. "You said just now that you were glad—glad that I had returned; *I*——" He struck himself on the breast with a passionate gesture as he uttered the emphatic syllable. "To think that there should be any one upon earth glad for the coming of a desolate wretch like me, and to think *that one* should be you! Oh, if you could know how, for the moment, those simple words lifted me into a new life, and transformed me into a new creature! Miss Denison, it is not well for you and I to meet to-day. I lose all command of myself. There are moments in the life of the sanest man that ever lived in which he is as mad as the most dangerous lunatic in Bedlam. I am mad to-day. Let me wish you good-bye. Let me leave you with the knowledge that you have been sorry for a sorrow whose anguish you will never know. My books will be better company than myself. Let me leave you with them till your carriage comes."

He had risen, and had been walking up and down the room; but as he said this he advanced towards Marcia, holding out his hand. She gave him hers, and suffered it to lie passive in his grasp while she spoke to him

"Mr. Pauncefort, why are you going to leave us?"

"Why!" he cried passionately. "Because I love you, Marcia Denison, more dearly than woman was ever loved before."

He let her hand fall from his, and fell on his knees before an empty chair. His head dropped on his arms, and with his face hidden thus, he knelt motionless, while Marcia stood a few paces from him staring aghast at that quiet figure so terribly expressive of despair. Even as she looked at him, thus, full of that tender pity which was the most sublime element of her love, her womanly sense of trifles made her aware that the shabby coat which Dorothy had talked about was shabbier than of old; and she accepted it as the evidence of poverty which grew sharper day by day.

He loved her! His passionate confession brought her profound joy, but it gave her no surprise—she had so long been sure of his love; and looking back to the earliest period of their acquaintance, she knew that she had been loved from the very first.

But George Pauncefort's profound emotion alike mystified and alarmed her. The revelation of his love had been wrung from him like a cry of pain. Marcia, proud herself, could understand the pride of a penniless man who shrank from the avowal of a love whose disinterested purity might possibly be questioned; but she could not understand a pride so desperate as to deepen into such despair as that which George Pauncefort's manner had expressed to-day. She watched him wonderingly. Was he praying, or had he shrouded his face in order to conceal the tears a man sheds with such bitter shame? While Marcia was wondering about him, he rose, and walked towards the window. One glance at his face told her that there were no traces of tears upon it: but its gloomy blackness was more terrible than the expression of a man who has been weeping.

"I told you I was mad to-day, Miss Denison," he said; "you had better let me leave you to the companionship of my books." Though he said this, he made no attempt to leave the room; but stood with his face to the window, watching the leaves bending under the beating storm.

There was a pause of some minutes, in which every sound of the crackling fire, the dreary dripping rain, the rustling of the wet branches, was distinctly audible; and then Marcia went to the spot where her father's tenant was standing, and laid her hand lightly on his shoulder:

"You say that you are mad to-day," she said half playfully, but with so much earnestness under the lightness of her manner; "that is a bad compliment to me after what you

said just now. Was there any truth in what you said, or is it only a part of your madness?"

"It is too fatally true, and it is the greater part of my madness."

He kept his face averted from her, and looked obstinately out at the rain as it came splashing heavily down on the low landscape, and shut out the dark distance, above which the thunder-clouds hung black and dense. Marcia paused a little before she addressed him again. Had he been any thing but what he was, had he been a prosperous man, her equal in years and in fortune, she would have perished rather than have invited him, by so much as one word or look, to speak to her when he was pleased to be silent, or remain with her when he wished to go. But then he was so much older than herself: he was so poor, so desolate. In his nine and thirty years, in his ruined fortunes, he might recognise two barriers which shut him from her — insuperable barriers which he could only cross by aid of her friendly hand held out towards him.

There is a pretty story of a rosebud given to her partner at a ball by the young Queen of England, in all the freshness of her girlish beauty—a partner who was afterwards the noblest model of what a gentleman and a husband should be. The story may be only a graceful invention, like that pretty speech about France and Frenchmen which a judicious reporter put into the mouth of Louis the Eighteenth; but the moral of the story is that royalty must stoop a little when it sees itself worshipped by a heart that is too noble not to be proud. A woman with a large fortune has a kind of royalty of her own, and may stoop a little now and then without loss of dignity. Marcia Denison felt this. Perhaps it is in the nature of women to patronise; for her heart throbbed with a delicious sense of joy as she thought how much her wealth would do for the man she loved, if only she could summon courage to stoop low enough to lay her tribute at his feet.

If only she could summon courage!—there was the difficulty. Had she been a queen, the business would have been easy. But the quasi-royalty of an heiress is not strong enough to bear such womanly humiliation without loss of dignity.

"I wonder at *his* pride, and yet I am so proud myself," she thought, with a half-smile upon her lips. And then after a pause, she asked, as shyly as a child who blushes beneath the scrutinising glances of some stern godmother: "Are you going to leave England again, Mr. Pauncefort?"

"Yes, Miss Denison; I am going on one of my old explor-

ing expeditions on the shores of the Niger. I am going in the footsteps of Barth and of the men who are gone. I scarcely wonder sometimes that Berkeley was sceptical as to the existence of any thing real or solid in all this universe. A man goes from one pole to another only to carry with him one idea, which is HIMSELF. Standing on the sands of the Dead Sea, groping blindly amidst a polar wilderness, in face of the awful grandeur of creation, the one mad passion of his life absorbs him still—the only reality amidst a world of shadows. All the verdure of the tropics, all the ice-bound solitudes of the arctic zone, serve only for a background to one figure—the inexorable Ego which reigns in the wanderer's breast. I talk nonsense, I dare say, Miss Denison; but sometimes when my life seems hardest to me, I begin to wonder whether, after all, I am only a shadow surrounded by shadows, and with nothing real around or about me, except the pain which I feel. I am in the mood to please your father just now. I would talk to him about Locke and Condillac to his heart's content."

"I am sorry for it," answered Marcia gently, "I have no taste for metaphysics, and to me it seems that the wisest of the metaphysicians, from St. Anselm to Bishop Berkeley, have been only splitters of shadowy straws, and triflers with the simplicity of truth. I thought the problem of life was solved eighteen hundred years ago, and I fancied that you were content to accept that solution."

"Yes, Miss Denison; but there are perilous moments even in the believer's life. Do you remember who it was that prayed 'Help Thou mine unbelief?' Have you never felt one moment—I will not say of doubt, for that is too strong a word,—but one moment in which the faint shadow of a hideous hypothesis arose between you and the light, and you have thought, *if* it should not be true—*if* the story of Galilee should be only a beautiful idyl, a saga, a mythic image of grandeur, no more real than the legend of a William Tell? Satan seems to be an unfashionable personage in our modern theology; but depend upon it, he still holds his place among us, and whispers poisonous hints in our ears."

"I am sorry that your experience has revealed his existence to you."

"I have lived alone lately, and Satan has a partiality for the lonely. In the lives of the saints who were hermits you will find many records of his presence; but I don't think he often visited John Howard or Elizabeth Fry. I have been a solitary wanderer, and the fiend has made himself the companion of my walks. I come fresh from his company into yours; so you must not wonder if I seem a boor and a brute.

You had better let me wish you good-bye, Miss Denison. Say farewell and 'God speed you!' to a wretch who goes out from the light of your presence into the dreariest darkness that ever lay between a ruined manhood and the grave."

He turned to leave the room, but before going held out his hand.

"You will shake hands with me," he said. "I know how churlish a return I seem to have made for your father's hospitable friendliness and your compassionate regard; but I have my secret. If you knew it, I do not think you would wonder that I am what I am."

He took Marcia's hand in his and pressed it gently. After that he would have released it; but the soft loving fingers clung to his, not to be repulsed, and a second detaining hand was laid gently on his wrist.

Held thus, and rooted to the spot by the sudden wonder that filled his mind, he gazed at the earnest face turned towards him,—the pale pensive face that to him seemed to be bright with a supernal glory.

"Why do you force me to speak to you?" said Marcia. "Why do you make me say that which should have come from your lips, and from yours alone? Do you think so meanly of me that you fear I should misunderstand you; or are you so proud that you cannot stoop to accept any advantage from a woman's hands? You tell me that you love me—ah, and I know you tell me only the truth—yet at the same moment you say you are going to leave me—for ever, perhaps; to die some horrible death in a foreign country, nameless and uncared for! I have read so much about Africa since I have known you, and my heart freezes with horror when I think of you, wandering alone in that dreadful country. Oh, George Pouncefort! if your love is worthy of the name of love, it must be more precious to you than your pride; and yet you would sacrifice your love to your pride. I have fancied myself proud: but see how low I stoop for your sake—for your sake!"

"Stop, Marcia!" cried Sir Jasper's tenant, drawing his hand from her gentle grasp and at the same time recoiling from her,—"stop, for pity's sake!"

He fell on his knees at her feet, with his head bent to the very dust and his clasped hands lifted above it.

"I will not stop! Your obstinate pride would have separated us for ever; and you would go out in the world doubting even in Heaven rather than you would bend the haughty spirit that rebels against the merest shadow of an obligation. If I had loved you, and been loved by you,

years ago, in my girlhood, I should have let you go in silence—to break my heart when you were gone. But we are no children, Mr. Pauncefort, to trifle with the chance of happiness that Heaven has given us. I am a woman, and my lonely, loveless life has taught me what a precious gift Heaven bestows when it gives a woman the affection of one honest heart. I will not lose your love; I will not sacrifice the chance of helping you to regain all that you have lost, for lack of courage to speak a few plain words, whatever sacrifice I make in speaking them. You love me,—if you had never said that I could never have spoken,—but you *have* said that you love me, and the rest is easy. I know your secret; to me your life seems so transparent; your ruined hopes—your broken fortunes—your poverty, so proudly endured. I know all, George; and I ask you to let my money—my poor paltry money—gained in the honest pathways of commerce—restore your name, retrieve your broken life. Oh, George, tell me you are not too proud to accept the happiness which my fortune may bring back to you—the fortune that I never valued until I knew you were poor.”

She covered her face with her outspread hands to hide the hot blushes that dyed it with so deep a crimson. With her face covered thus, she waited for him to answer her. For some moments he was silent; then, rising slowly from his knees, he said in a low broken voice, so low as to be almost a whisper:

“You are quite mistaken as to my story. There is no landed squire in this county richer in the world’s wealth than I am. Oh, Miss Denison, how will you ever forgive me, when you know what I thought might be hidden from you for ever, but which must be told you now!”

Marcia dropped her hands from before her face, and looked at her lover. He was standing a few paces from her, with his face turned towards the light. In all her life she had never seen such a mortal pallor as that which she saw now in the dark face she loved. But in the depth of her humiliation, this only struck her in a confused way. The justification of her conduct was suddenly snatched away from her; all the theory of her life was shattered. Her father’s tenant was not poor! She had not stooped from the dignity of her womanhood to elevate a lowly suitor, whose proud humility was the only barrier that divided him from her. It was all so much wasted degradation. Impelled by an unconsidered impulse, she had flung her maidenly pride into the dust at this man’s feet. She had asked him—yes, asked him to accept her hand and her fortune! Only a few minutes had elapsed since she had spoken, and yet she thought of her own words with

shame and wonder. She had besought him to accept a hand which he did not care to demand for himself ; a fortune which he did not want. Tears rose to her eyes—the passionate tears of wounded pride. She drew herself up with an involuntary movement of offended dignity, and went back to the hearth, where her bonnet and shawl had been hung to dry.

"I think the storm is nearly over now, Mr. Pauncefort," she said quietly. "Will you be good enough to see if the carriage has come?"

"Yes, Marcia ; but not yet. You have spoken to me ; and I must speak to you. Oh, my darling, my love!—let me call you thus once, and once only : when you pass the threshold of this house a few minutes hence, you will have bid good-bye to me for ever!—have you never thought of any other reason than poverty for my lonely life, my dull despair? Oh, Marcia, how little you have known me, after all!—you, who have dropped such balm into my wounds, who have given me such tender comfort for my sorrows,—how little you have known me, when you can think that poverty was the evil that made my life a burden to me! Poverty! pshaw! a rough honest friend and not an enemy ; a companion Diogenes, who strips the mask off earth's conventionalities, and points out the few true men among the knaves. To a weak sensuous nature poverty may be terrible ; for it takes another name, and calls itself deprivation—unsatiated thirst for impossible pleasures, the torture of Tantalus. But for me poverty has no terrors. Ah, if you knew how often in my lonely walks I have listened to the blacksmith beating at his glowing furnace, and have envied him his labour, his light heart, and his empty pockets! Do you think so meanly of me as to suppose that, if poverty were my only trouble, I would sit in this room, when I might go out into the world and fight for one of the thousand prizes that Fortune holds for the head that thinks, and the hand that works? No, Miss Denison, I am a rich man ; and the gulf which yawns between you and me is a wider gulf than any division created by difference of fortune."

Marcia looked at him with something like terror in her face. She had trusted him so entirely ; she had heard him accused, and her faith had been unshaken. Serene in her instinctive confidence, she had smiled at Blanche Harding's ominous hints ; and now all at once her heart sank, for it seemed as if those dark insinuations were about to receive confirmation from his own lips. Yes, it must be so. The gulf between them was this man's dishonour—his dishonour! And amidst the tempestuous ocean of passion on which her soul had been tossed to and fro, her only anchor had been her faith in him. She put up her hand with a piteously-implo-
ring

gesture, as if she would have arrested any confession that was about to escape his lips.

"Oh, do not tell me that you are anything less than I have thought you!" she cried; "I have believed so entirely in your goodness, your truth, your honour. If I have been deceived until now, let the deception go on for ever. I cannot bear to think that it is any shame or disgrace which has banished you from the world!"

"Marcia Denison," answered Sir Jasper's tenant, "there are people who have to bear the burden of dishonours in which they have had no part. There are social laws which revenge on the innocent the wicked deeds of the guilty. The name I have a right to bear was disgraced fifteen years ago: but by no act of mine. I went to sleep one night a proud ambitious man, with all the world before me, and with sustaining faith and energy that help a man to win the noblest prizes earth can give. I woke the next morning to find myself what you see me now—a thing without a hope, without a name,—too glad to hide my ruin from the world in which I had once held myself so proudly."

He covered his face with his hands. While his eyes were darkened thus, he felt Marcia's loving fingers trying to loosen those strong hands from the face they shrouded.

"The disgrace came by no act of yours," she murmured softly, "ah, I knew, I knew that *you* were true and noble! George, if you love me, dishonour may sully your name, but it shall never affect me. Women have borne dishonoured names before to-day. Give me yours, George: it shall be a more precious gift to me than the loftiest title that ever was worn upon this earth. George, why do you force me to say what you have a right to despise me for saying?"

"Despise you, Marcia! Oh, I am the guiltiest, basest wretch that ever lived. It is so hard, so hard for me to speak the truth! God, who only knows the weight and measure of the tortures He inflicts, knows how I love you, and how fiercely I have struggled against the growth of my love. The confession of my love is an insult to you, Marcia. My passion itself is a crime. My life for the last fifteen years has been a lie, and the name I have borne is a false one. My name is Godfrey Pierrepont, and I am the dishonoured husband of a guilty wife!"

Never had Sir Jasper's tenant seen in any countenance such a depth of sorrowful reproach as that which looked at him now out of the tender grey eyes he loved so well.

"And you have let me love you," said Marcia; "and you have let me speak to you of my love! Oh, what shame, what shame, what shame!"

She hurried towards the door with her arms stretched before her like a half-demented creature who flies from some unspeakable horror; but on the very threshold, before George Pouncefort could save her, Sir Jasper's daughter fell prone upon the very spot whereon the country people were wont to point triumphantly to the blood-bespattered traces of the murdered cavalier.

CHAPTER XIX.

FAREWELL.

WHEN Marcia lifted her heavy eyelids and awoke from that sudden swoon, she found herself seated in the worn-eaten oak chair, with the open doorway before her, and the air blowing in upon her with a damp freshness that was better than all the eau-de-Cologne that ever an indefatigable abigail bespattered over a fainting mistress. At first the fresh cool air brought Miss Denison nothing but a delicious sense of relief from something very like suffocation. Then came a consciousness of external things; she heard the rustling of the leaves and the pawing and champing of a horse at the garden-gate, and knew that the carriage had arrived. Last of all there returned to her, with unspeakable bitterness, the knowledge of why she had fainted, and what had happened before her fainting-fit.

"Oh, my God!" she thought in her despair; "there has been so little joy in my life, but I have never suffered like this until to-day."

For the moment she did not attempt to move, but sat with her eyelids drooping and her eyes fixed upon the floor with an almost stupid look. She felt a strange disinclination to stir, to take any step in the progress of her broken life. If it could have ended there, at that moment!

"I am so little use in the world; nobody loves me, nobody has any need of me," she thought piteously; "my life is only a penance. What sin did I commit when I was a child, that I should suffer so much in my womanhood? And it is wicked even to wish to die."

She was aroused from her sense of utter prostration by the voice of the man she loved. It struck upon her as sharply as the lash of a whip; and she looked up at George Pouncefort, ~~stung~~ into sudden life.

"I want you to say that you forgive me," he began, in a low sad voice, "and then I shall be brave enough to bid you farewell for ever."

She did not answer him immediately; but after a pause she said, "Do you know how deeply you have humiliated me?"

"I have not humiliated you. There can be no humiliation for such a nature as yours. You have spoken the noblest words that ever a woman uttered. Unhappily, you have spoken them to a man who has no right to hear them. The crime and the shame were his. I know now that it was the basest cowardice which prompted me to keep my secret. But oh, Marcia, how could I think that you would stoop to love me! How could I believe that your tender compassion for a ruined life could ever grow into anything grander and holier than compassion! And even now, though your own lips have said so much, can I be quite sure that the impulse which stirred them was not the generous pity of a noble heart—the self-abnegation of a woman who offers her richest treasure to a beggar? That you can love me—*me!* Oh, God, it cannot be real! It is too like my dreams.

Marcia uttered no word in response to that passionate outburst; but after a pause, she said quietly:

"Will you take me to the carriage, Mr. Pauncefort?—I must call you by that name. Papa will be uneasy about me, perhaps, and I am quite ready to go back."

She rose, but Sir Jasper's tenant laid his hand upon her arm.

"For pity's sake, forgive me," he said. "I shall leave this place at daybreak to-morrow, to go to the other end of the world, perhaps. I *cannot* go without your forgiveness; I cannot—I cannot. Think me a good Christian if I do not kill myself to-night. I have suffered too much lately. Yes, Marcia, some burdens are too heavy. Say that you forgive me, and let me go back to the solitudes out yonder, where no one who is interested in my death can track me, and where, if I go mad, there will be no one to put me into a mad-house. Marcia, forgive me!"

He fell on his knees. His passionate violence, the despair that was so nearly akin to madness, awoke all that was most womanly in Marcia Denison's nature. She bent over the dark face that was lifted towards her, distorted and convulsed by the agony of a passion that had burst all the bonds of reason. She laid her hand softly on the burning forehead, and parted the tumbled hair as gently as ever motherly hands tended a sick child.

"Forgive you!" she murmured. "I have nothing to for

give. It was a false pride that made me so angry. There can be no question of humiliation between you and me. We are both too unhappy. Give me your hand, and let us say good-bye."

"Good-bye, Marcia—my bright ideal of womanhood—good-bye."

He rose and offered her his hand. The storm had gone by without ; the storm was lulled within ; George Pauncefort was himself again, grave and sombre, with only a quiet look of sorrow in his face.

"You will bear your burden bravely?" said Marcia questioningly. "Yes, I know you will. You are too good a Christian to feel often as you have felt to-day. Oh, believe me, there is no burden too heavy ; divine endurance has measured the weight of all ; and we have only to be patient. Promise me you will try to support your sorrows like a Christian."

"For your sake, Marcia ! Ask me to do anything for your sake, and the doing of it shall be the business of my life. There is no difference between love and fanaticism."

"You will try to be a Christian for my sake?"

"Yes, Marcia, as I hope to be saved—for your sake. There is no such thing as myself in the world henceforward ; there is nothing but you, and my love for you. But I am going to be a Christian to please you ; and my first sacrifice shall be to bid you good-bye."

"Good-bye. I shall pray for you every night and morning, as I should pray for my brother if I had one."

"Only one word more, Marcia. You have asked me nothing of my past life. And if you had questioned me, I scarcely think that I could have brought myself to speak of that shameful story in your presence. Yet I should like you to know it. I have made it the business of my existence to escape from what people call sympathy ; but I should like to have your pity. I will write the story, Marcia. Will you read it?"

"Yes. Once more, good-bye."

They were on the threshold as Marcia spoke ; and as she stepped from the narrow threshold a sudden gleam of yellow sunlight shot forth upon the edge of a cloud, and shone reflected on her face as she turned towards her father's tenant.

George Pauncefort uttered a cry of triumph.

"See, Marcia," he exclaimed ; "the sun shines upon us ! I was never superstitious until to-day ; but to-day I will believe anything that hints at a hope. I accept the omen, Marcia. This parting is not for ever."

She did not answer him. Her calm sorrow had no affinity with his feverish exultation of spirit, and was not subject to any abrupt transition from despair to hope. To her it seemed

as if the dull horizon of her life had only opened for a moment, to reveal a glimpse of an impossible heaven, and to close again for ever. Already she was resigned to the thought that George Pauncefort could never be any more to her than he had been during the last few months. And it seemed as if he had been so much to her; for he had been and must for ever be, the one creature to whom she had been precious; the only being who had ever been profoundly affected with either joy or sorrow for her sake; the solitary friend; the only lover: an image never to be disturbed from his place in her heart.

George Pauncefort handed his guest into her carriage. The sunlight had burst forth in fuller glory, beautiful on the deep-green of the wet leaves and the tender emerald of the fern; supernally beautiful on the latticed casements of the Hermitage, and on the shining surface of the pool.

In this sunlight, and in the wondrous tranquillity of earth and sky that succeeds a summer tempest, Sir Jasper's tenant and Sir Jasper's daughter parted.

It was not until the next evening that Marcia received a packet, which had been left in Mrs. Thursgood's charge when George Pauncefort and his servant quitted the Hermitage. It was a large parcel, containing some rare old books that Miss Denison had once expressed a wish to possess, and its arrival excited no particular attention; but hidden amongst the quaintly-bound volumes there was a packet in a large envelope, addressed to Marcia, and signed with George Pauncefort or Godfrey Pierrepont's initials. Miss Denison opened the parcel late at night, in her own room, and the first chill glimmer of day found her still reading Mr. Pauncefort's letter.

CHAPTER XX.

THE STORY OF A YOUNG MAN'S FOLLY.

"**SHALL** I tell you what I felt, Marcia, when first you beckoned me into your father's room, and I sat in the dusk looking at you, with the warm glow of the fire about your figure, and the fitful light shining every now and then upon your face? There is no such thing as love at first sight; for I did not love you then. The feelings that stirred my heart as it was stirred that night belonged only to the strange atmosphere I had entered. You can never understand *how* strange that room and its be-

longings were to me. No terror of the desert, no peril from savage beasts or treacherous men would have moved me half so keenly as I was moved by this one glimpse of an English home. And for yourself. Marcia, what were you to me then—you who have since become the universe? How I wonder as I remember that night, when I only thought of you with a calm, artistic pleasure, as a connoisseur thinks of a beautiful picture!

“Let no man ever neglect the warning of his instinct. From the first my instinct told me that the delicious happiness I found in your presence, in your father’s society,—ah, how persistently I cheated myself as to the *real* source of my pleasure!—from the very first I was conscious of peril: but the temptation was too great. I could not resign the happiness. It was so easy to cheat myself. When your image shone brightest before my eyes, I thought, ‘If I had been a happier man, I might have had such a creature for my daughter: there are men who have had such women for their wives.’ Again and again I reminded myself that I was almost old enough to be your father: again and again I deluded myself by the old shallow lies with which a weak man palters with his conscience. A weak man; and I had thought myself so strong till I knew you.

“It was only when I had been an inmate of your father’s house, and found how horrible a pang it was to me to go back to the darkness of my old life—it was only then that I knew I loved you. It was only when I sat alone in my desolate room, recalling every look of your face, every tone of your voice, maddened with the memory of them, and the knowledge that I had no right to see your face or hear your voice again—it was then only that I knew the intensity of my love, and how little hope there was that my wretched heart would ever know its old dull quiet again. God knows how I struggled against my temptation: you know how I succumbed to it. I should have gone back to the desert—back to the lonely marches and the weary haltings under a torrid sky; but the tempter was too strong for me. The cup which he offered to my lips was so sweet. From first to last I knew that it was poison—from first to last I drank the insidious draught, knowing that there was death at the bottom of it.

“Had I no thought for you in all this? Yes, I thought of you with cruel anguish as I fancied how compassionately you would smile at my folly if the knowledge of it could reach you. I watched you too closely not to fancy myself master of every thought and feeling of yours. Your reverential kindness, your courteous attention, the sympathy which you evinced for my favourite studies, the pleasure you appeared to take in my con-

versation,—to me these seemed only the natural graces of a perfect creature, whose divine compassion extended itself even to a gloomy middle-aged man whose broken life rendered him an object of pity.

“In all the regions of the impossible could there be anything so wild as the thought that you could love me—*me*? Can I imagine or understand the possibility even now? No, my soul and life! only in my dreams—only in my dreams can I believe in so deep a joy. But I have no right to speak to you of this. I have no right to approach you in any character but that of an unhappy wretch who has need of your pity.

“If I could have known you in my early manhood—when life was bright before me—when in all the world there was no height so lofty that it seemed impossible to my ambitious fancies! I think ambition is only another name for youth, and that a man who has never been ambitious has never been young. I was the only son of a younger son. My father and mother were both what the world calls ‘highly-connected,’ but they were both poor. You will think perhaps that I am going to burst forth into some grand tirade upon the horrors of poverty; but you need have no such apprehension. The poverty of my boyhood had no horrors, for it was endured by souls too lofty to droop under the influence of shabby clothes or indifferent dinners. I have seen my mother dine in a cotton gown, but I have never seen her quail before the presence of a creditor. I have seen my father in a threadbare dresscoat hobnobbing with a marquis, and looking as much a marquis as his companion. There is something noble in the old races after all. Set a Pierrepont to sweep a crossing, and he will sweep it like a Pierrepont; so that passers-by shall glance back at him and mutter, ‘A nobleman in disguise.’ Do not laugh at me, Marcia, because I have clung to those foolish fancies of my youth amidst the ruin of my manhood. My mother’s race was noble, but her love for my father changed into reverence when she thought of his name; and it was on her knee that I learned how grand a thing it was to be a Pierrepont.

“My father was a philosopher, a linguist, a collector of rare old editions and curious pamphlets; everything that a man can be who believes that all the happiness of life is comprised in the verb ‘to know.’ In all my memory of him, I can never recall his being interested in any event of our every-day life, or the lives of our neighbours. We lived in an old tumble-down house, which had once been a vicarage. The old churchyard sloped westward below our drawing-room windows, and my first memory is of the crimson sunlight behind dark masses of wreathing ivy, which I knew afterwards were

hidden graves ; but the church had not been standing for the last hundred years. Our garden adjoined this grassy enclosure, and I played sometimes among the rose and currant-bushes, sometimes among the ivy-hidden tombs that had once been stately monuments. The house belonged to my Uncle Weldon, the head of our family, and we lived in it rent-free. All around us, wherever our eyes could reach, the land we saw was Weldon Pierrepont's, and had been in the possession of Pierreponts from the days of Stephen. The village nearest to us was called Pierrepont, and I was seven years old before I passed the boundary of my uncle's estate.

"If we had lived anywhere else, we might, perhaps, have been made to feel that there is some sting in poverty. At Pierrepont, the man who hesitated to doff his hat as my father passed him would have been scouted as a kind of infidel. Our own name and my uncle's wealth, covered us with a kind of halo ; and when my mother went through the village-street in her straw bonnet and cotton dress, her promenade was like a royal progress. Thus from my very childhood I learned to believe that it was a grand thing to be what I was ; and when I was old enough to know what poverty meant, I laughed to scorn the suggestion that it could be any hindrance to my success in life.

"My first misfortune was perhaps the fact that I lived too long at Pierrepont—too exclusively among people who respected me for the associations of my name—too far away from the open field of life, in which Jones the baker's son has as good a chance of victory and loot as the direct descendant of the Plantagenets. My mother and father were equally ignorant of the world beyond Pierrepont Castle and Pierrepont Grange. My parents were too poor to give me a university career ; and as my father's learning would have been enough to divide among all the professors of a college, it was naturally supposed that I could need no better teacher ; so I was educated at home. I know now that I could not have had a worse tutor, and that the key to my broken life is to be found in the narrow school of my boyhood. Under my father's tuition, I became a sage in book-lore, and remained a baby in all worldly knowledge. Heaven only knows what dreams have visited me in that old walled garden, where the grass grew deeper and softer than any verdure I have ever trodden on since. What visions of worldly greatness to be won far away in the unknown region, where so many crowns hung within the reach of daring hands. What vivid pictures of a successful career—of prizes to be won while all the bloom of youth was yet upon the winner—of a sharp brief struggle with fortune, and a garland of fame to be brought home to that very

garden and laid at my mother's feet. Every boy brought up very quietly with gentle people, amidst a pastoral landscape, is apt to fancy himself an embryo Wellington or Nelson. My childish yearnings were for a soldier's life, and I pictured myself coming back, after the conquest of India, to Pierrepont Grange, to marry the curate's blue-eyed daughter, who was so desperate a coquette in haymaking time. God help me now, in my desolation and hopelessness ! I can bring back the very picture I made of myself, riding up to the low white gate on a cavalry charger and dressed in a general's uniform !

"All these dreams melted away when I grew a little older, and my father had imbued me with something of his own love of learning. There were many consultations with my rich uncle as to my future career, and I found that the question was regarded less with a view to my interests than with reference to what a Pierrepont might or might not do without damage to the other Pierreponts. After a great deal of deliberation it was settled that a Pierrepont need undergo no degradation in being created Lord Chancellor, and it was thereupon decided that I should be called to the bar. Weldon Pierrepont, my uncle, had sons of his own, and his property seemed as far away from me as if I had been a stranger to his blood ; but I was his nephew, and his only nephew, so he volunteered to allow me a small income while I studied, and endeavoured to work my way in the legal profession. His offer was accepted ; and I went up to London by a mail-coach with letters of introduction to some of the highest people in the metropolis in my desk, and with five-and-twenty pounds, the first quarterly payment of my income, in my pocket.

"You would smile, Marcia, if you could know how intoxicating to me was the consciousness that I was stepping out into the battle-field, how implicit my faith in my power to win fame and fortune. The introductions I carried with me would have obtained me a footing in half the best drawing-rooms of the West-end ; but the only one of my credentials of which I made any use was a letter addressed to an octogenarian legal celebrity, who lived by himself in the Temple, and who had the finest law-library and the best collection of Hobbimas in England. This gentleman received me with civility ; told me that I looked like a Pierrepont ; warned me against the dissipations of London, which were all very well for common people, but not fit for Pierreponts ; and put me in the way of beginning my new life. Under his advice I selected a couple of garrets, which were dignified by the name of chambers, and I looked on with profound satisfaction while the name of Pierrepont was inscribed in white paint on a black door, immediately below the leaking ceiling that had been disco-

loured by the rain-drip of about half a century. Ah, what a boy I was ! I plunged into the severest course of legal study that I could devise for myself ; and the sparrows twittered every day in the morning sunshine before I closed my books and went to bed. I hired a lad, who cleaned my boots and brushed my clothes, and who was to open my door in case, by some extraordinary combination of circumstances, any one should ever come to knock at it ; and I employed a laundress, who cleaned my rooms and bought my provisions. I have dined for a fortnight at a stretch on no better dinner than a mutton-chop, and no stronger beverage than tea ; and I have lived for a month sometimes without interchanging a word with any creature except the laundress or the boy.

“ Ah, what a foolish dreamer I was, Marcia ! I fancied that my life was in my own hands, and that in my own untiring energy, my own love of learned labours, there lay the powers that could mould me into a Bacon without a Bacon's vices ; a second Brougham, with more than a Brougham's greatness. In my garret, with sickly candles fading in a sickly dawn, I fancied myself at the summit of Fame's mighty mountain, with all the world below me. The vision of the future was infinitely more real to me than any penalties of the present. I began to suffer from chronic headache ! but I wrapped a wet towel round my forehead, and laughed my malady to scorn. If Homer had knocked under to a headache, the *Iliad* might never have been finished. If Bacon had not been superior to physical pains, the world might have lost the *Novum Organon*. What mighty shadows visited me in my attic chambers ! I have never seen them since. The Rosicrucians believe that the grandest mysteries of their faith reveal themselves only to the pure gaze of the celibate. An earthly face was soon to come between me and the faces of my dreams.

“ I had lived a year in London—a long, lonely year, broken by no home-visit ; for though I pined for the sight of my mother's face, I could not go back to Pierrepont until I had advanced by some small step upon the great high-road I was so pleased to tread,—I had been in London a year, and my spirit was as fresh as when I left home ; but the dull commonplace machine—the body—which will do no more work for a Bacon than for a baker, broke down. I had an attack of low fever, which was not entirely free from danger ; and the doctor who attended me told me that if I wished to live and to go on working, I must give myself a summer holiday in the country, and close my books for some weeks. My first impulse was to go to Pierrepont ! but when I looked at myself in the glass, and saw the ghastly-looking face reflected there, I felt that it would be a cruelty to alarm my mother by presenting myself

before her until I had recovered a little of the strength I had wasted so recklessly in my daily and nightly labours. My going back to Pierrepont might have imperilled my future career ; for one of the tenderest mothers that ever lived would perhaps have taken fright at my altered looks, and dissuaded me from pursuing my legal studies.

"I loved my mother very dearly ; but I could not endure the idea of sacrificing my ambition even for her sake. So I did not go to Pierrepont ; and the bright dream of my future was wrested from me by a wicked woman instead of being voluntarily surrendered to a good one.

"Instead of going to my dear old home in the remotest depths of Yorkshire, I went to a little village on the very edge of London. I have done battle all my life against the insidious doctrine of fatalism ; but I find myself wondering sometimes why it was I chose that one village from amongst so many places of the same character, and how it was that such a multiplicity of small circumstances conspired to bring about my going there. The place was not a popular resort. It lay quite away from the beaten track ; and I had never seen the name of it until I dropped down upon the rustic green one summer's day, and read the inscription on a sign-post. I had wandered listlessly from the Temple to the City early that morning, and had taken a place in the first coach that left the neighbourhood of the Bank, too indifferent to inquire where it would take me. How well I remember the hot summer's day ; the light upon the village green, where there were ducks splashing in a pond, and pigeons strutting before a low-roofed inn, the sheltered beauty of a glade that led away to the church ; the richly wooded landscape sloping westward in the distance ; and above all, the delicious sense of repose that hung about the place like a palpable atmosphere, and soothed my shattered nerves into drowsy quiet ! The place was so near London, in fact, that I wondered not to hear the roaring thunder of wheels booming across that woodland slope ; yet in all semblance so remote from bustle and clamour, that I might have fancied myself in the most pastoral district of my native county. I decided at once that this was the spot in which I might recruit my strength, without going far away from the scene of my labour ; and the only question was whether I could get a lodging. I inquired at the little inn, before which the pigeons were strutting, and was told that I could be accommodated there with rooms that, despite their rustic simplicity, were infinitely more luxurious than my chambers in the Temple. The village was only a cluster of four or five handsome old houses, with a halting-place for man and beast on the green, a pond for the ducks, a sign-post

for the enlightenment of strayed wanderers, and a tiny church half hidden by the yew trees that overshadowed it. There was a blacksmith's forge next door to the little inn, and there were two or three old-fashioned cottages with little gardens before them, in which mignonette and geraniums grew luxuriantly. In all the place there was only one lodging to be had, and that was the one I took. If that had been occupied, I must have gone to seek a resting-place elsewhere; and then the whole of my life since that hour would have been different from what it has been. I try not to remember upon what a gossamer-thread the balance of my fate swung to and fro that day when I dawdled on the village green and lounged in the village public-house.

"I did not go back to London. I had no friends of whom to take leave, no social engagements from which to excuse myself, no debts to pay; all the money I possessed in the world was in my pocket. I wrote a line to my laundress, telling her where to send my portmanteau, and despatched it by the return coach; and having done this, all my arrangements were made, and I was free to saunter out on the green, with my hands in my pockets, and breathe some of the fresh air that was to refit me for my work in London.

"I went out, weak still, but not listless; for it would have been strange indeed if the aspect of a summer landscape had not been very pleasant to me after the chimney-pots I had looked at so long. The sun was dropping down behind the lower edge of the western slope, and a faint crimson glory touched the water at my feet, and flickered among the leaves of the great dark beeches in the glade. For the moment I forgot that I was an embryo Lord Chancellor. Bacon and Montesquieu might never have existed, for any place they had in my mind. The *De Augmentis*, the *Readings on the Statutes of Uses*, the *Esprit des Lois*, might never have been written, for any influence they had upon my thoughts. I was a boyish dreamer, intoxicated with the beauty of the scene around me, and ready to burst forth into rapturous quotations from Keats or Shelley, as every new glimpse of the lovely landscape burst upon me. For twelve months I had been a recluse in a London garret; for twelve months I had seen nothing brighter than the chrysanthemums in the Temple gardens.

"I walked slowly along with my hands in my pockets, whispering quotations from the *Revolt of Islam*, between the two grand lines of beech and elm, growing so close together that the path between them was a densely-shadowed green passage rather than a common avenue; a long arcade, odorous with a faint aromatic perfume, and narrowing in the distance to one little spot where the yellow light shone like a star. I

emerged from the avenue into this warm evening sunshine, and found myself close to the low white gate of the churchyard.

"The sound of the organ came floating out through the open windows of the little church, and I stopped at the gate to listen. Of all sounds upon earth, that of an organ is to my ear the holiest music. If I were an infidel all the rest of my life, I should be a true believer while I listened to the music of a church-organ. A Protestant among Roman Catholics—kneeling amidst the shadowy splendour of Cologne, or Antwerp, or Rouen, I have been as true a Romanist as the most bigoted of my companions while the glorious harmonies of Mozart rapt my soul in a trance of delight. I stood with my arms folded on the gate, and listened to the organ of Weldridge Church as I have listened since to grander music in so many splendid temples. The organ was not a good one; but it was well played. The musician possessed taste and feeling; the music was from Beethoven's *Mount of Olives*. I listened till the last sound of the organ died away, and I was still lingering with the dreamy spell of the music full upon me, when it was exorcised by quite a different sound—the silvery laughter of a woman ringing out upon the air.

"And then I heard a clear voice cry, 'Thank you, Mr. Scott; but it really is the vilest old organ. Why doesn't the rector get up a subscription, and preach sermons, and plan a concert or fancy-fair, or something of that kind, and get a new instrument? It really is horrible. However, it was very kind of you to let me play; and I had such an absurd mania for trying that organ. But I always want to try every piano I see; and I do think if I were visiting at Buckingham Palace, and there were a piano in the room, I should whisk up to it, and run a double chromatic scale from the bottom to the top. Imagine the Queen's feelings! A chromatic scale is more hideous than any thing in the world, except the howling of melancholy cats.'

"There was a low masculine growl after this; and then the clear voice broke out again: 'Do you really think so? Well, I'm sure it's very kind of you to say so. I was educated at a convent, you know—not that I'm a Catholic—oh, dear, no! Papa always sent particular orders about my opinions not being biassed every time he paid the half-yearly bills; and I used to play the organ in our convent-chapel; but I never played to a real congregation in a real church. It would be such—I suppose I mustn't say fun; but it really would be nice. However, papa will be waiting for dinner if I don't take care, and then I shall be scolded. Good-afternoon.'

"Then came a light pattering of feet, the flutter of a muslin dress, the resonant bang of a heavy door; and the prettiest woman I had ever seen in my life came tripping along the churchyard path towards the very gate on which I was leaning.

"The prettiest woman I had ever seen in my life. Yes; it was in the form of Beauty's brightest ideal that Caroline Catheron appeared to my foolish eyes. I had seen so few women, I had so vague an idea of what lovely and lovable womanhood should be. This bright creature, who chatted and laughed with the grey-headed old organist, and shook out her airy muslin scarf as she tripped towards me,—this beaming young beauty, whose dark eyes flashed with a happy consciousness of their own brilliancy,—this queen of roses and lilies,—this splendid belle, whose image might have shone upon a dreaming sultan amidst a throng of shadowy houris, this holiday idol, to be set up for the worship of fools and profligates—seemed to me the incarnation of feminine loveliness. My heart did not thrill then as it has thrilled since at the lowest murmur of one loved voice; my soul's purest depths lay far below this woman's power to stir them; but my eyes were dazzled by this living, breathing splendour of form and colour, and my rapt gaze followed Caroline Catheron as if the little parasol she held so lightly in her hand had been the wand of an enchantress. I opened the gate for her, and stood aside to let her pass. She thanked me with the prettiest inclination of her head, and tripped away under the trees with the old organist by her side. I made a paltry pretence of going into the churchyard and looking at the tombstones; and after keeping up this pretence for about five minutes, I followed the organist and his companion.

"They were talking. The girl's voice rang clearly out in the stillness—silvery as the singing of the birds in the woodland around about us. Her talk was commonplace and frivolous enough; but for the last twelve months I had rarely heard any sweeter feminine tones than the hoarse snuffle of my laundress: and I followed and listened, enthralled by this clear music of a pretty woman's voice, which was so very new to me. She was talking about her papa,—what he liked and what he did not like; how he was an epicure, and it was so difficult to get any thing tolerable for dinner in Weldridge; how he could scarcely exist without his newspapers, and how the newspapers often arrived so very late at Weldridge; how he was beginning to grow tired of the place already, in spite of its rustic beauty, and was thinking of leaving it very soon. My heart sank as I heard this. All the glory of

my holiday would vanish with this beautiful creature, whom I had only seen within the last quarter of an hour. From the organist's replies to the young lady's speeches, I understood that her father's name was Catheron. Catheron! It sounded like a good name, I thought, and it was something at least to know her name; but oh, how I wondered by what blessed combination of small chances I should ever come to know this wondrous being, who was as gracious to the old organist in his shabby week-day clothes as if he had been a duke! I wondered which of the stately mansions at Weldridge sheltered this divinity. I wondered in what umbrageous gardens she dawdled away her days, fairer than the fairest flower that ever blossomed upon this earth. There were several grand old houses at Weldridge—secluded habitations embowered in foliage, and only revealing themselves by a clock-tower, a quaint old stone cupola, or a stack of Gothic chimneys peeping through a break in the wood.

"My divinity and her companion went by the stately gates and under the shadow of the lofty walls; they went to the very end of the leafy passage, and then emerged and walked briskly across the green, where an unkempt pony and a drowsy-looking donkey were cropping the short grass in listless contentment. They crossed the green; the young lady parted from her companion before one of the row of cottages near the inn at which I was to spend my holiday. She dropped the organist a pretty little curtsey, opened the wooden gate, and went into the rustic garden. I watched her till the cottage-door had opened and engulfed her. She was my neighbour. My heart gave a great leap at the very thought; and I went back to my lodging filled with a happiness that was new to me—a strange, intoxicating kind of happiness; like the drunkenness of a boy who has tasted champagne for the first time.

"Why do I tell you these things, Marcia? Is this the vivisection of my own heart at which I am assisting so coolly? No! I, who exist to-day, have no share in the nature of this young law-student who fell in love with Caroline Catheron seventeen years ago. I am only telling you of the foolish infatuation of a foolish boy, who mistook the capricious impulses of his fancy for the true instincts of his heart.

"I went back to my lodging, and made a ridiculous pretence of eating the meal—half-dinner, half-supper—that had been prepared for me. I was still weak from the effects of my fever; and after this attempt I sat in an easy-chair by the open window, looking out at the dusky landscape, above which the stars were shining faintly. A grey mist had crept

over the neighbouring woodland and the distant hills, and lights were gleaming here and there in the windows of one of the Weldridge mansions. At another time I should have been eager for a candle and a book, and impatient of this senseless twilight; but upon this particular night I think I forgot that I had ever been a student. All the mighty shadows of my life had vanished, and across the dim grey mist I saw a woman's face looking at me with a bright coquettish smile. I abandoned myself to a delicious reverie, in which I fancied my beautiful neighbour tending an invalid father—hovering about an idolised mother; a creature of life and light in that simple household; a being from whose presence joy emanated as naturally as the perfume emanates from the flower. If the impossible Asmodeus had taken me out amongst the chimneys of the little inn, and had bidden me look down through the roof of the cottage—if a friendly demon had done this, what should I have seen? An idle discontented woman lolling on a sofa, trying to read a novel, but too much occupied by her own vexations and her own vanity to be even interested in what she read—a peevish daughter, a neglectful sister: no ministering angel, no domestic treasure—nothing in the world but a conscious beauty, absorbed in the consideration of her own charms, and indignant at a social system which had provided no young nobleman ready to place his coronet upon her brow.

CHAPTER XXI.

A BROKEN LIFE.

“I WENT out upon the little rustic balcony, and stood there with the warm evening air breathing softly round me. I could see the row of cottages, the neat little gardens that were so full of the simple flowers familiar to me in my youth. I could see the dim light shining here and there in a window; but I could not distinguish the particular habitation that sheltered my divinity; and I was half inclined to be angry with myself because no special instinct told me which it was. I was startled from my foolish meditations by the sound of a voice mingling with the other voices that floated up to me from the open windows of the

parlour below ; a voice that set my heart beating faster than it had beat since Caroline Catheron had vanished from my enchanted gaze ; and yet it was not Miss Catheron's voice ; it was only the bass growl of the organist. He was not the rose, but he was, at any rate, the companion of that wondrous flower. I went down stairs, and made a paltry pretence of putting my watch right by the clock in the bar-parlour ; and then as I loitered talking to the landlord, he remarked that I might find myself dull in my solitary chamber up stairs, and suggested that I should step into the parlour, where a little knot of the most respectable inhabitants of Weldridge was wont to assemble nightly.

"There's Mr. Marles the clerk, and there's Mr. Scott the organist, quite a deep-read gentleman in his way, I've heard ; and you'll rarely meet him without a book in his hand. And there's Mr. Stethcopp the baker, and Mr. Brinkenson, an independent gentleman, who occupies the first of that row of cottages as you come to directly you leave this door. Weldridge would be a dull place, you see, if there wasn't a little friendliness and sociability between the inhabitants. We've had some out-and-out gentlemen in our little parlour, I can tell you. There's Mr. Catheron, now, at one of the cottages ; you might go a long day's walk and not find any one more the gentleman than him."

"I could feel myself blushing when the innkeeper said this. It was so nice to know that the father of my divinity was a gentleman.

"Mr. Catheron is a native of Weldridge, I suppose ?' I said, interrogatively. I did not suppose any thing of the kind, but I was too far engulfed in the abyss of folly to be straightforward in the smallest matter relating to Caroline Catheron.

"Oh dear no !' exclaimed the innkeeper ; 'Mr. Catheron does not belong to one of our Weldridge families.' He said this very much as if the inhabitants of Weldridge were a select and peculiarly-privileged people, infinitely superior to the most gentlemanly Catheron who ever lived. 'No, he is only a visitor in Weldridge, having come here for the benefit of his health, as you may have done, and having come upon the village promiscuous-like, just as you may have come upon it,' added the landlord, bringing the subject down to my comprehension as if I had been a child.

"I tell you all this frivolous stuff, Marcia, because even in my sorrow it is sweet to linger over these pages. I think of your hand resting on them by-and-by ; I think of your breath ruffling the leaves. And then I want so much to confide in you. There is nothing in my life that I would hide

from you, now you know what a broken life it is. I tell you this story of a boy's infatuation, in order that you may understand the folly which ruined my manhood.

"'Has Mr. Catheron—a—large family?' I asked; but I could boldly have anticipated the answer. Was it likely the father of a divinity would have many children? Goddesses do not grow in broods. My landlord answered my question as coolly as if he had been talking of Mr. Stethcopp the baker, or Mr. Brinkenson the independent gentleman.

"'There's a daughter,' he said; 'a very fine-grown young woman. And I've heard say there's another daughter—a married lady—away in the Indies, or somewhere, with her husband. And there's a lad home for the holidays; a regular impudent young shaver.'

"I winced under the landlord's epithets of 'fine-grown young woman' and 'impudent young shaver,' as applied to my divinity and my divinity's brother; but it was a privilege to obtain any shred of information upon the subject of my infatuation, and I was very gracious to my informant. I cast about for a little further enlightenment on this one all-important question; but the landlord shifted his discourse to the current topics of Weldridge; so I told him I would avail myself of his suggestion; and I went shyly into the parlour, to make acquaintance with the notabilities of the village.

"I was received very civilly, very cordially; but I discovered the difference between the respect shown to a Pierrepont at Pierrepont and the familiar greeting offered to an unknown young traveller in a strange place. Mr. Stethcopp the baker patronised me, and Mr. Brinkenson the independent gentleman was almost regal in the superb condescension with which he offered me a chair near him. The little assembly was occupied in the discussion of public events. For a few minutes I listened respectfully to sentiments that were as strange to me as the discourses of the Mountain and the Gironde would have been to any young provincial aristocrat newly arrived from his hereditary lands. At Pierrepont we were stanch Tories, from my uncle the squire to the peasant who gathered wood in the Chase. But the notabilities of Weldridge were Liberal to the backbone; and if my mind had been disengaged, I believe I should have entered into the lists against them in defence of my family principles, and might thereby have rendered myself very obnoxious. My mind had never been more completely absorbed, however; and I sat quietly under Mr. Brinkenson's wing with all the outward semblance of a respectful listener, while my thoughts hovered fondly about the splendid image of Caroline Catheron; and I thus secured the future favour of my companions as a very well-behaved young man.

"While they were deep in an argument as to the merits of Sir Robert Peel's last speech, I heard a strange voice—a voice that sounded foreign to Weldridge—in the bar without; and in the next moment I witnessed a social phenomenon. All at once the loud talk of the Weldridge notabilities dropped into a lower key; all at once Mr. Brinkenson the independent broke down in a Johnsonian period.

"'Mr. Catheron!' said Stethcopp the baker, in a solemn hushed voice, and then the door was opened rather boisterously and a gentleman entered the room.

"Her father! Yes, and he was like her. Again I was dazzled by the splendour of dark eyes, the glitter of white teeth, the warmth and richness of colour, the easy grace of manner which had fascinated me in the young lady I had followed from the churchyard. It was from her father that my divinity had inherited her full red lips, her aquiline nose, the dark arches above her flashing eyes; even the moustache that shaded Harold Catheron's lip was only an exaggeration of the ebon down that darkened his daughter's. Infatuated and bewitched though I was, one faint thrill of revulsion stirred my heart as I saw how much the man was like the woman. Surely in that moment I must have begun to understand vaguely that the attribute of womanliness was the one charm wanting in Miss Catheron's beauty.

"While I was wondering by what studied and subtle process I might approach the father of my idol, he took his place in the little assembly, and asserted the sway of town-bred ease over rustic stiffness as completely as if he had been in some acknowledged manner the sovereign lord and master of every creature in the room. While I was hoping that somebody would call his attention to me, and bring about an interchange of civilities, he turned to me with a graceful familiarity which was the very opposite of Mr. Brinkenson's, and yet infinitely more expressive of the difference between him, the gentleman of position, and me, the nameless stranger.

"'Your face is new to me,' he said; 'and yet not exactly new either, for I saw you from my window this afternoon, as my daughter came in from her walk. You are something of an invalid, I conclude, from your appearance; and if I am right, I can only tell you that you couldn't have a nicer place than Weldridge to get well in, or kinder people than Weldridge people to nurse you back to health and strength. I came here an invalid myself, and, egad, I think I shall go back to my own place a Hercules.'

"Heaven knows what I ought to have said in reply to this civil address. I know that I stammered and blushed,

and then shyly asked Mr. Catheron whether he was going to leave Weldridge just yet.

"He told me no; his Weldridge friends treated him so well that he was in no hurry to leave them; and if his friend the butcher had only more liberal notions as to the number of calves required for the carrying on a business with justice to his customers in the matter of sweetbreads, and the number of sheep necessary to protect his customers from daily disappointment in relation to kidneys, he (Mr. Catheron) would have nothing left to wish for in the rustic paradise which an accident had revealed to his enraptured eyes.

"And then I told him how I too had fallen upon this pleasant resting-place by the merest chance that ever led an ignorant wanderer to his fate. And after that I grew bolder, and told him who and what I was, with some vague foolish notion lurking in my mind that when he found I was a Pierrepont, he would open his arms and take me to his heart, and straightway invite me to his house and introduce me to his beautiful daughter. But he only nodded his head approvingly, and muttered,

"*'Pierrepont! A good old Yorkshire name, Pierrepont! There was a Pierrepont in my regiment, but he spelt his name with one r; and, between you and me, he was rather looked down upon as a snob.'*

"*'My uncle is Weldon Pierrepont of Pierrepont,' I said simply; 'and our name has been spelt with two r's ever since the Conquest, when Hildred Pierrepont—'*

"*'Exactly,' answered Mr. Catheron eagerly,—'came over with the Duke of Normandy, no doubt. Our people distinguished themselves at that period; but it was on the other side of the business. We were allied to Edward the Confessor, through Ethelfreda, the second wife of—but I won't trouble you with this sort of nonsense. My children have all these old stories by heart, and love to talk of them. For myself I am a man of the world, and I know how little use your blue blood is to a man if he can't contrive to keep a decent balance at his banker's. And so your uncle is Weldon Pierrepont, the wealthy squire of Pierrepont in Yorkshire. I remember him at the clubs when I was a young man; rather eccentric, and a bachelor, if I remember right. Did he ever marry?'*

"*'Yes,' I answered; 'he married rather late in life.'*

"*'And had a family, I suppose?'*

"*'Yes.' I told him there were three sons—lads at Eton.*

"*'Three of them! That's a bad job for you,—that's to say if you are next heir to the estate.'*

"*I told Mr. Catheron that I was the next heir; but that I had no more expectation of inheriting the Pierrepont property*

than I had of succeeding to a heritage in the moon. I told him how it had been decided that I was to be called to the bar; how my family had sent me to London, in order that I might see something of the world; and how I had been devoting myself to a course of preliminary reading in my Temple chambers.

“‘But that’s not exactly the way to see much of the world, I should think,’ said Mr. Catheron smiling.

“I blushed as I answered him. I found myself blushing every minute in my intercourse with Mr. Catheron. I could not resist the impression that he was the father of my divinity, and that talking to him was only an indirect manner of talking to her. He looked at me more attentively after this little talk about my uncle, and when he got up to go away, he shook hands with me, and expressed a polite desire to see me again; but he did not invite me to his house. I would have bartered all the letters of introduction fading in my desk for one line addressed to him. I went back to my own rooms immediately after his departure. I went to bed tired and languid, but not to sleep; only to lie awake thinking of Caroline Catheron.

“The next day was Sunday, and I went to the little village-church, where I saw her sitting meekly by her father’s side. Shy though I was, I was bold enough to time my coming out so as to encounter them in the porch, and the beating of my heart almost stifled me, as we came out of the solemn shadow into the warm summer sunlight.

“It was not *I*, Marcia, who loved this woman for her beauty. My life and soul! I tell you again and again it was not *I*. It was only a foolish boy, who had no attribute in common with myself as I am to-day, but who had one quality, purer and higher than any I possess,—unlimited faith in the truth and honour of his fellow-men, boundless belief in the innocence and goodness of woman.

“Mr. Catheron turned to me in the friendliest manner as we came out into the churchyard, and offered me his hand, and then in the next moment I was introduced with all due ceremony to my divinity. She smiled graciously, and gave me courteous replies to my lumbering remarks about the fine summer weather, and the harvest, and the rustic loveliness of Weldbridge. The condescending kindness of her manner inspired me with the fear that she looked upon me as the merest hobbledohoy; and I would have sacrificed half-a-dozen years of my life if I could have looked as many years older. She made only the faintest struggle with a yawn as we walked homewards under the trees by the very path along which I had followed her the evening before, and I saw her gaze wandering abstractedly to the ducks in the pond while her father lingered

talking to me at his gate. Heaven only knows how keenly I felt her indifference. I think I should have gone away almost despairing if Mr. Catheron had not asked me to look in upon him in the evening, if I had nothing better to do. 'If I had nothing better to do!' as if in all the world there could be any more entrancing happiness than was to be found in her presence.

"We are dull quiet people, my girl and I," said Harold Catheron; 'but as you are a stranger and an invalid, you may find it pleasanter to spend a dull evening with us than a dull evening by yourself.'

"I thanked him as enthusiastically as if he had offered me a dukedom, and then went home on air. How I got rid of the rest of the day, I scarcely know. I could neither eat my dinner, nor read the newspaper which the landlord brought me. My books had not yet arrived. I walked up and down my little room until I was too weak to walk any longer, and then sat looking at my watch until seven o'clock. My landlord had informed me Mr. Catheron generally dined at five; and I had decided that I might decently pay my evening visit any time after seven.

"There was an unusual stillness upon the summer landscape when I went out of the little inn-door, and walked very slowly towards the house in which Harold Catheron lived. The Weldridge people were diligent church and chapel-goers, and the majority of the small population was absorbed by the evening services. In that serene stillness I lingered for a few minutes, looking absently at the horses browsing on the green, possessed all at once by the hobbledehoy's shy dread of approaching the woman he admires; and then I summoned courage, and walked to the little gate. A boy of twelve or fourteen years of age, with a handsome defiant face, was lounging on the gate, and looked boldly up at me as I approached. There was sufficient resemblance to the features of my divinity in the boy's dark bold face to reveal him to me as the brother I had heard of. Anxious to conciliate any creature who bore her name, I saluted the boy very respectfully as I passed him, and received an insolent stare in return. A maid-servant admitted me, and ushered me immediately into a little parlour where Mr. Catheron was sleeping profoundly in an easy-chair, with his head thrown back upon the cushions and the edge of his newspaper resting upon the tip of his nose. No words can describe my disappointment as I looked round the room and saw how empty it was without my divinity. There was no sign of feminine occupation, no open book, no handkerchief or gathered flower thrown lightly aside by a woman's hand. There was nothing to betoken that Caroline Catheron had **only**

lately left the apartment, and might speedily return. Mr. Catheron's newspapers scattered the table and the floor; Mr. Catheron's half-consumed cigar lay on the mantelpiece. Though the little garden outside the open window was rich in all sweet-scented cottage flowers, the shabby chamber was not brightened by one gathered blossom.

"Cruelly disappointed, cruelly embarrassed, I seated myself opposite Mr. Catheron and awaited that gentleman's awakening. The newspaper dropped upon his breast, and I had ample leisure for the contemplation of his countenance. It was a very handsome face certainly,—how could it be otherwise than handsome when it was so like *HERS*?—but its beauty was not quite pleasing even to my inexperienced eyes. It was a little too much like the face of a handsome vulture, who had cultivated a formidable pair of moustaches, and assumed a military style of undress. The curve of the aquiline nose, the bird-like modelling of the eyelids, the upward arch of the thin lips were not the characteristics of a noble countenance. I think I knew as much as this even then; I think I knew as much as this even that afternoon, when the spell of Caroline Catheron's beauty possessed me so completely that I had little consciousness of anything except my eager desire to look upon her again.

"If I had presented my letters of introduction, if I had been enlightened as to the world I lived in by a year's intercourse with society, I should not have been so weak a wretch in the hands of Harold Catheron and his daughter. But the boy swinging on the garden-gate was my master in all knowledge to be acquired by the experience of life, and he knew it.

"My host started out of his sleep presently, and apologised to me for his inattention.

"*'My daughter has gone to church,'* he said; *'help yourself to a glass of that sherry; Caroline shall give us some tea when she comes in, and in the mean time you shall tell me all about your people in the North. You have no idea how the name of Pierrepont brings back my young days, and the time when I knew Weldon Pierrepont as one of the celebrities of the West-end. And so he turned country gentleman, and married, and had a family! Strange, strange.'*

"Mr. Catheron's eyelids dropped languidly over his eyes, and he threw his head back upon the cushions of his chair, as if he had let his mind slip back to the past. Musing thus, and nodding his head every now and then with a little sigh of assent, he let me talk of my life at home, and of all who belonged to me. He let me talk—or it seemed to me at the time that he only let me talk; but even then I had some consciousness that it was he who kept my Uncle Weldon's name

perpetually uppermost in the conversation, bringing me back to that point when I was inclined to wander to some more cherished subject,—my mother's sweet companionship, my father's learning, my own ambitious dreams. However it came about, I told Harold Catheron all there was to tell about my uncle, and told him how the wealthy master of Pierrepont Castle was a feeble invalid, with the poisonous taint of hereditary consumption in his blood, and with three sickly sons, whose uncertain health was a perpetual source of anxiety. 'And your father?' said Mr. Catheron, opening his eyes; 'is he consumptive too?'

"It seemed cruel to ask me such a question,—a question that must have struck home to my heart like a dagger, if I had been compelled to answer in the affirmative. Happily it was not so

"No," I told him; "my Uncle Weldon and my father are only half-brothers. My grandfather married twice. His first wife died very young in a decline, leaving one son; and it is from her my uncle inherits his weak health."

"A sorry inheritance," muttered my host; "however, it is to be hoped that one or other of the three sons will escape the hereditary taint, and live to be master of Pierrepont Castle. If you were a mercenary young man, it might seem almost uncivil to express such a hope in your presence; but I am sure that frank, open countenance of yours is not the face of a man who has any hankering for dead men's shoes."

"I eagerly assured him how unwelcome that heritage would be to me which I could only reach across the graves of my three cousins; but he waved off the subject, as if its mere discussion were unworthy of us; and then I heard a light footstep in the garden, and the flutter of a dress, and the opening of a door, and my divinity came in.

"I am fain to confess that she looked cross and peevish, and that if any warning could have saved me from the consequences of my own folly, I might have taken warning by her manner on that day, and on many other days. But I think it is the peculiar property of a hobbledeloy's love to thrive upon ill-treatment; and perhaps Miss Catheron's disdainful airs and graces constituted only a part of the charm that bound me to her.

"It had been insufferably warm in church, she told us; and insufferably dusty on the way home from church; the sermon had been stupid; the singing execrable; and not a single stranger had been present to enliven the dowdy congregation. She made tea for us at her father's request; and she went through the processes of making it and pouring it out very much as if the task imposed upon her were the

last straw laid upon the burden that rendered her life unendurable. But while we were taking our tea, and when I had ventured to talk to her, and had betrayed the completeness of my subjugation by every word I uttered, she brightened considerably, and by-and-by condescended to be supremely agreeable.

"Would you like to know what my wife was, Marcia, in that first day of our acquaintance, when I sat by her side in the little lodging-house parlour, while her father abandoned himself to his newspaper, and left us free to talk as foolishly as we pleased? What was she then, in all the bloom of her splendid beauty? A wicked woman? No; only a weak-minded woman—half-educated; influenced by no good example; elevated by no lofty teaching; left to go her own way, and taught to believe that in her beauty she possessed the 'Open, sesame!' to high fortune.

"She treated me with ineffable condescension that evening; but I could see that she was not displeased by my admiration, which was not expressed by any outspoken compliment, but evidenced no doubt in my every look and tone. There was a piano in the room, and her father asked her to play. She obeyed him with a very listless air: but she played some of Mozart's grandest masses magnificently, and her listlessness fell away from her like a cloud as she played.

"I sat by the piano, entranced by the sublimity of the music, bewitched by the beauty of the musician. I discovered afterwards that Caroline Catheron's mother had been a professional pianiste, and that the girl's love of music had been cultivated from infancy. Mr. Catheron talked of his absent daughter in the course of the evening, and I heard that my divinity's sister was a twin sister, and her living image.

"My daughter Leonora married absurdly young,' Mr. Catheron said; 'and chose for her husband a grave middle-aged officer in the Company's service—a good match in a pecuniary sense, I admit; but by no means the kind of match I should have wished. However, my girl entertained quite a romantic devotion for Captain Fane, so I submitted to the force of circumstances; and my submission costs me my child, who has been scampering about with her husband's regiment in the jungles of Bengal for the last three years.'

"Caroline shrugged her shoulders a little contemptuously as her father made this lamentation. 'Pray don't be sentimental, papa,' she said; 'what is the use of talking about love-matches, when you know very well you don't approve of them?'

"I don't approve of a handsome woman throwing herself

away upon a penniless scapegrace,' answered my host; 'but I disapprove of him because he is a scapegrace, and not because he is penniless. If a daughter of mine chose an honourable and talented young man for her husband, she should marry him with my consent, and my blessing into the bargain; provided always that the man was a gentleman, and the son of a gentleman.'

"I felt my face dyed a vivid crimson for some little time after this; and stealing a look at Caroline presently, I saw that the colour in her cheeks was heightened; and by the brightness of her eyes and the pouting of her lower lip, I knew that she was angry. Something in her father's speech had displeased her. She had been sitting at the piano until now, only turning to talk to us in the pauses of her playing; but she closed the instrument abruptly, and seated herself in an obscure corner behind her father's chair, where she obstinately remained for the rest of the evening, not to be lured from her retreat by any of the coaxing speeches with which Mr. Catheron tried to conciliate her.

"'Beauty is sulky,' he exclaimed at last,—he called his daughter Beauty, and he spoke to her very much in the tone which people are wont to use when caressing a favourite lap-dog,—'and when Beauty is sulky, *c'est un fait achevé*. The sun goes down at a given hour, and nothing less than a Joshua can induce him to postpone his setting. Phœbus himself is not more arbitrary than Beauty; and Beauty is more capricious than the sunshine. She has her bright days and her cloudy days; and to-day it is cloudy. If you will dine with us to-morrow, Mr. Pierrepont, I will guarantee you a little sunshine, and we will have some secular music. Beauty and her brother Gervoise shall go to Barsett to fetch strawberries in the morning, and she shall sing Moore's melodies to us in the evening while we eat the strawberries she has fetched for us. If you are going Barsett way—and the old church is well worth seeing—you might help Beauty to carry her parcels. She would perish before she asked you any favour to-night, because she is sulky; but look in upon us after breakfast to-morrow, and I'll wager she'll be glad of your escort; for that tiresome boy of mine is always quarrelling with her'

"The tiresome boy, whom I had first seen lounging at the gate, had been in and out a good deal in the course of the evening, and had been at last ignominiously ordered to bed by his father. If I say little of him, it is because I thought so little of him. I know now that Gervoise Catheron was shamefully neglected by his father and his sister; but at the time of which I write, my miserable infatuation had such full possession of

me that I was conscious of nothing in this world except that Caroline Catheron was the most beautiful object in creation, and that I loved her. Despise me if you will, Marcia, but not more bitterly than you would despise a child who sees a gaudy butterfly for the first time, and fancies the possession of the radiant insect would afford him perpetual happiness. I was not quite twenty years of age when I fell in love with the woman who was afterwards my wife.

"A man might have been disenchanted by the insolence of conscious beauty, the capricious humours of an ill-tempered woman who gave full indulgence to her temper; but to a boy's mind these attributes only increase the charm of the woman he admires. The uncertainty of her smiles renders them doubly bewitching; her openly-expressed contempt fascinates the victim it might more naturally disgust; for it elevates the beautiful into the unattainable. When I thought of Miss Catheron that night, I thought of her as a being whom I could no more hope to win for my wife than I could hope to be the consort of a queen. I know now myself, as I was then, well enough to know that my passion would have lost its most powerful charm if it had lost its flavour of utter hopelessness. When I went home to my lodging that Sunday night, I sat by my open window, looking out at the moonlit landscape for upwards of an hour, enjoying my unhappiness, and thinking how convenient the village pond would be for me to drown myself in when Caroline Catheron had scornfully rejected my heart and hand.

"I found Mr. Catheron's prophecy realised when I presented myself at the cottage next morning. My divinity was very gracious, and we sallied forth on the best possible terms with each other, attended by the boy Gervoise, who came with us unwillingly enough, and who lounged and loitered behind us for all the length of our journey to and from the little market-town of Barsett—a gay little town enough in those days, when there were coaches still upon every road, and pleasant bustle at every road-side inn. Miss Catheron had many little commissions to execute, and I was delightfully happy in attending upon her while she executed them. And then we all three went back to Weldridge loaded with airy little parcels and baskets of strawberries, and my divinity talked to me graciously, while the sulky boy lurked and loitered behind us. It was only a mile's walk across richly-wooded meadows, where the cows stood and stared at us in picturesque attitudes; but to an infatuated lad in love with a woman of three-and-twenty, it was a mile cut through the very heart of Paradise. I will not dwell upon this foolish courtship, though, as I write, the past comes back upon me so vividly, that it is difficult to avoid recalling

each separate stage of that unreasoning passion, whose evil consequences have blighted my life. It is enough for me to tell you that from the first moment in which Harold Catheron ascertained that only three consumptive boys stood between me and a great fortune, he set himself to win me as a husband for his daughter—the daughter whose capricious temper was the torment of his life : whose petted beauty had failed to realise the lofty expectations to which it had given birth ; a daughter of whose airs and graces the selfish Sybarite had grown so weary that he would have been glad to dispose of her hand to the first bidder who could promise to support her decently.

“I was admitted into the little family on terms of perfect intimacy. I was invited to dinner twice a-week, and asked to drop in whenever I pleased. The tenderest of Moore’s melodies were sung to me in a clear soprano every evening, and every evening I hung over Miss Catheron’s shabby little hired piano, bewitched alike by the singing and the singer. But if my host was unvaryingly cordial in his manner, I had to endure all the transitions of his daughter’s temper : and I did endure them as meekly as the basest slave who ever cast himself in the dust to be trampled upon by an angry Sultana. On the sunshiny days I basked in the light of Miss Catheron’s smiles, and was happy ; on the cloudy days I trembled before her frown, and was miserable. But the *primeurs* of life are very sweet ; and my joy and my sorrow had the same freshness, the same flavour of youth and hope which intermingles itself with every emotion in the breast of boyhood. I was too much absorbed by my own feelings to be very curious as to the antecedents or the present circumstances of my new acquaintance. Mr. Catheron told me he was the descendant of a grand old Saxon race, who could claim kinsmanship with the princes of the Heptarchy, and I believed him implicitly ; for to my mind his daughter’s beauty bore the stamp of royalty, since only the scion of kings had any right to be so beautiful. I listened respectfully to whatever Harold Catheron chose to tell me, and resigned myself to the belief that the Norman Pierrepoints were very small people indeed when compared to the Saxon Catherons. Incidentally I learned that Caroline’s father had held a commission in the Grenadier Guards : had sold out on his marriage, and had spent three fortunes. I have observed since this period that a ruined spendthrift has never spent less than three fortunes : the number is as arbitrary as the traditional half-crown which a millionaire carries in his pocket when he drops down worn and tired, a friendless boy, in the streets of London. After his wife’s death, Harold Catheron had served under Don Carlos, and his daughters had spent the brightest days of their girl-

hood in Spain. For the last five years my friends had been wanderers in England and on the continent, never staying very long any where, as I made out from their reminiscences of different places. What did it matter to me how or where my divinity's girlhood had been spent? It was enough for me to know that she was beautiful, and that it was my privilege to worship her. The time slipped by. The first cool breezes of autumn found me wandering in the stubbled fields beyond Weldridge with Caroline and her brother for my companions. I had been nearly three months an inmate of my lodging in the little village-inn. Long ago my health and strength had come back to me, and I had been backwards and forwards to the Temple, and had brought my law-books into the country, having argued with myself that it was almost as easy to pursue my studies at Weldridge as in London. But alas for my boyish dreams of greatness! The shades of Bacon and Coke had vanished out of my life. I tried to invoke them, but Caroline Catheron appeared to me in their stead; and after sitting over my books late into the quiet night, I found myself in the morning with no better fruit of my study than the vague remembrance of dreams in which her image had shone upon me. Still I did try honestly to work—still I held steadfastly to the hope of a great future. At the end of every week I wrote a long letter to my mother, in which I told her a good deal about my studies and my improving health, and a very little about my new friends. I meant to write to her at length upon this subject, and to confide entirely in her before I avowed myself to Miss Catheron. But I deferred the composition of this important letter from day to day, and from week to week; and the declaration which I had intended to be such a very formal business burst almost involuntarily from my lips one day while Caroline and I were gathering blackberries in the leafy hollow of a little wood, with Gervoise somewhere in attendance upon us.

"She was standing on a bank that raised her a little above me. She was looking down at me out of a framework of branches that closed around her as she stood there. It was one of her cloudy days, and her capricious temper had kept me in a state of torture all the afternoon. But she had melted suddenly at last, and had complained to me of the wretchedness of her life, the unkindness of her father, the daily degradations to which her poverty exposed her. She had complained to me with tears in her eyes—the peevish tears of a selfish woman who bemoans her own troubles, and has no consciousness of anything upon this earth beyond herself and her personal pains and pleasures. But to me those tears were more afflicting than the aspect of a Niobe's anguish. Of all

unreasoning passions, a boy's love is the most entirely unreasoning. And is a man's love so much better? Ah, Marcia! Even now, when I fancy myself so wise, do I love you because you are good and pure and holy? or do I love you only because I love you? By my life and soul, I cannot answer that question. But if I heard to-morrow that you had poisoned every one of those poor village children amongst whom I have seen you sitting,—so sweet and saintly a creature, that I have wondered not to see a halo of supernal light shine out from among the shadows round your head,—I scarcely think that I could love you less, so little within my own volition is the one absorbing sentiment that has become the first principle of my life. Forgive me for introducing your name into this record, which I had intended to make only an unvarnished statement of my miserable history; but your image and the madness of the present thrust themselves every now and then between me and the images of the past, and I forget that I have no right to tell you all I feel and suffer; I forget that I have no right to sully your name by inscribing it upon these pages.

"The sight of Miss Catheron's distress put all my prudent resolutions to flight. She was very unhappy with her father, she said; he did not care for her properly; when he was kindest he only treated her like a favourite spaniel; when he was out of temper he treated her worse than any dog was ever used since this world began. She said this in little snatches of words between passionate sobs, as she stood above me plucking pettishly at the leaves and brambles in the hedge about her. She talked to me with her face half-turned away, and I doubt if she was conscious of my presence. It was a relief to her to complain, and she complained. She showed me a scar across her plump white arm, the mark of a red-hot poker with which her father had struck her one day in his passion; but she acknowledged that he had not known the poker was hot. Her brother was rude and tiresome, she said. Her sister had married well, and had gone away to India, to enjoy life amongst all sorts of delightful people, without bestowing one thought upon leaving her to poverty and wretchedness, to cross landladies and shabby dresses. Her sister was, indeed, a selfish creature, and had never loved her properly. No one loved her properly—no one—no one—no one!

"She beat her foot upon the ground, passionately moved by some deeper emotion than I had ever seen in her yet, as she reiterated those last words.

"'Oh, Miss Catheron!' I cried, 'oh, Caroline, you must know how much I love you! you must know how much I—IDOLISE you!'

"I blushed as I uttered the big word, I believed so implicitly in myself and my own emotion. Caroline Catheron turned and looked down at me! her peevish frown vanished and a half-amused smile lighted her face.

"'You are such a boy compared to me,' she said. 'I don't believe you know what you are talking about.'

"Of course I told her that the passion which raged in my heart of hearts was eternal as the sky that overarched us that autumn afternoon. *Alastor* and the *Revolt of Islam* were terribly familiar to my lips in those days; and I blush even now when I think of the rhodomontade in which I set forth my feelings for Miss Catheron. She was pleased with the romantic nonsense. It was her nature to be delighted with admiration and flattery, whencesoever it came. She forgot all about her troubles for the moment, and graciously condescended to stroll through the wood by my side, listening to my rhapsodies with drooping eyelids and a faint blush upon her cheeks. But if Caroline was forgetful of the evils she had so lately bewailed, I was not. I told her that if she would only accept the devotion of my life, she might be rescued at once from all the miseries of her existence, removed for ever from the ill-treatment of her father. It was true that I was for the moment by no means a rich man, having only a hundred a year from my uncle, independent of my labour; but in a few years I should be called to the bar. And then I gave the reins to my ambitious imaginings, and informed my divinity of the glorious career I had mapped out for myself; a career which I must certainly achieve if she were by my side, the sweet companion of my toils, the idolised wife for whose dear sake the labours of a Hercules would seem the lightest tasks that ever man performed victoriously. I told her how, through the influence of my father's old friend the recluse of the Temple, I had already earned a good deal of money by writing certain learned essays for a quarterly review, and how I could rely on doubling my income from this source. And then the future! I had very little to offer my divinity in the present; but there are few grander prizes on this earth than those I promised her in the glorious days that were to come. She listened to me always with the same half-smile upon her rosy lips.

"'Papa wouldn't much care whom I married, so long as he got rid of me,' she said, when I begged her to let me speak to her father. 'He used to talk very grandly about my making a great marriage, if I—if I did as he wished; but girls who wear washed-out muslin, and live in stupid lodgings in out-of-the-way villages, don't marry dukes or millionaires every day in the year; and I think papa begins to understand that.'

"I accepted this as a kind of permission to declare myself

to her father ; and then I implored her to answer the one grand question on which my future depended. Did she love me ? Ah, no ! I called back the presumptuous words the moment they were uttered. Was it not the wildest folly to imagine that she could love me ? Would she tolerate my love ? would she graciously permit me to be her slave ? would she kindly consent to my lying prostrate in the dust at her feet ? would she generously condescend to set her foot upon my neck ? It was in some such phraseology as this that I asked Caroline Catheron to be my wife. It is not thus, Marcia, that, were I a free man, I would ask you the same solemn question.—I could win no decided answer from the capricious beauty. She tortured me by coquettish little speeches about her own heartlessness ; her unfitness to be the wife of a struggling man ; the difference between our ages ; the incompatibility of our tempers. But her words and her manner were utterly at variance. On the one hand, she threw every imaginable obstacle in the way of my suit ; while on the other, she gave me every encouragement to go on suing.

“ ‘ I don't suppose I shall ever marry at all,’ she said. ‘ You know what a dreadful temper mine is, and how I have been spoiled by indulgence. If you want a submissive wife, you should marry some little fair-haired person with pink cheeks and white eyelashes. Dumpy people with freckles are generally amiable, I believe. You don't know how tired you would be of my temper after a week or two. Papa and I are always quarrelling. I give you fair warning, you see, of what you have to expect.’ ”

“ ‘ What I had to expect ! ’ That phrase sounded as if I was accepted. And for the warning, what warning would have stayed me in that mad folly of my boyhood ? If a hand had come down from heaven to write the character of this woman in letters of fire across her brow, I would have believed in her beauty, and not in the writing that defaced it. I asked that night for a private interview with Mr. Catheron, and my request was granted. When I offered him my humble supplications to be received as the suitor of his daughter, he smiled graciously upon me, pleased, he said, by my boyish fervour, so refreshing in our degenerate days. He would not say no ; he would not say yes. He would only say Wait ! I was such a mere lad, he told me, that it would be foolish to depend too much upon the endurance of an affection whose highest charm was its youthful poetry. These boyish passions have sometimes withstood the wear and tear of a lifetime, and have endured in all their freshness to the grave ; but on the other hand, your early attachments are so apt to be fleeting ; and of all the millstones you can tie round a man's neck, when

you want to sink him effectually, a long engagement is the heaviest.

“‘You say my daughter is disposed to look kindly on your suit,’ Mr. Catheron said in conclusion. ‘She is older than you by a year or two; but in character she is a mere child, and I should doubt her power to understand her own feelings. I can only say again, Wait! Go back to your studies; remember that the future you talk of can only be won by unremitting work; but come and see us now and then—every Sunday if you like. A quiet day in the country will refit you after your week’s labours. Treat my daughter as if she were your friend or your sister, and by-and-by, when you are a year or two older and wiser, we will begin to think of a marriage; in the mean time there shall be no engagement whatever between you and Carry; and if you see any one you like better, you will be quite free to change your mind.’

“I had no argument to oppose against this very reasonable arrangement; and I gladly accepted it. Mr. Catheron gave me his blessing at parting, and further bestowed upon me a miniature of his two daughters, painted for him by an artist of some distinction before Leonora’s marriage, and, as I have since had reason to believe, never paid for. With this treasure in my possession I went back to London at the end of the week, and set to work once more amongst my books in the dreary chambers under the tiled roof that had sheltered so many generations of briefless barristers. But the mighty shadows of the past had utterly deserted me, and the image of a beautiful woman was the only presence that kept me company in the long night-watches.

“When I went back to Weldridge to pay my first Sunday visit I wore a deep band of crape upon my hat, and I carried in my pocket a black-edged letter containing the news of my youngest cousin’s death. The boy had been removed from Eton to fade slowly at Pierrepont—the first victim to the hereditary taint that poisoned the blood of my Uncle Weldon’s race. Nothing could have been more sympathetic than Mr. Catheron’s manner when I told him how the child had been the pet and darling of his household and our own. I looked to Caroline for sweeter consolation than any her father could give me: but she received my sad tidings very coolly, and said the little boy was no doubt much happier where he had gone, and it would be absurd to grieve for him. ‘I wish I had died when I was a child,’ she said; ‘I’m sure I should have escaped all kinds of worry and trouble, and people would have been sorry for me, and would have said all manner of sentimental things about me: while as it is, I dare say every body will be very glad when I die.’

"Of course I told her that desolation and despair would attend her death, let it come when it would. I have prayed since that time—fervent passionate prayers—that I might be saved from the sin of wishing for her death; and yet *have* wished for it in spite of my prayers.

"I wrote to my mother as often as ever; but not as frankly as of old. My heart always failed me when I wanted to tell her of Caroline and my love. There would be so much for me to explain. I should have to answer so many questions. And then Captain Catheron was not in a position he had a right to occupy, and there would be the dreary story of a spendthrift's downfall to tell; and the story might prejudice my mother against Caroline. On the other hand, I argued that as I had entered into no positive engagement, there was really very little worth telling. There would be plenty of time for explanations by-and-by. I worked steadily every week, rarely leaving my chambers except for an hour's walk in the dusk of the evening, or for a day's work in the reading room of the British Museum. I extended my literary connections after my return from Weldridge, and was a contributor to several periodicals of a high class. My work in this way brought me in a good deal of money, which I saved for Caroline. Mr. Catheron had told me incidentally that it would be utterly absurd of me to talk of marrying until I had the nest-egg of a modest fortune. I remembered this; and when I went dinnerless, as I very often did in those days, it was for Caroline's sake that I was economical.

"The autumn faded into winter—a hopelessly wet and cheerless winter—and I was working quietly on, with the dull round of labours only broken by the Sunday visits to my divinity, who received me with smiles or frowns according to the caprice of the hour. I might have spent my Christmas at Pierrepont Castle, where my father and mother were keeping house, and dispensing old-fashioned charities and hospitality, in the absence of my Uncle Weldon, who could only support the winter in a southern latitude. My mother wished me to be with her. My own heart yearned for her presence; but I was invited to spend the day with Caroline, and I could not break the chain that dragged me towards her. My literary work was a good excuse for my stay in London; and I added the sum that my journey would have cost me to the little hoard it was such thrilling pleasure to amass—for Caroline. My reward was the sulkiest reception I had ever yet endured at Miss Catheron's hands. She scarcely spoke to me half-a-dozen times during the dreary winter's day; and she only answered her father in monosyllables when he addressed her. Mr. Catheron tried to entertain me; but Caroline refused to

play when he asked for music; and while I was trying to devise some means of seeing her alone, she announced that she was suffering tortures from a splitting headache, and wished me good-night, utterly regardless of my entreating looks, and the whisper in which I implored her to tell me what was amiss. Her father affected to believe the story of the headache, and completely ignored his daughter's ill-temper. I went home alone in the coach, through slushy roads and drizzling rain, very much cast down by my divinity's chilling behaviour, and thinking sadly of the lighted windows of Pierrepont Castle shining out upon the dark night, and the pleasant party gathered round my father and mother in the cedar-panelled saloon.

"I was not permitted to write to Miss Catheron, so I was likely to remain in utter ignorance of the cause of her temper until the following Sunday, when I might find an opportunity of questioning her. I felt assured that something out of the common course had happened to disturb her; and the thought of this filled me with perplexity. I even found a difficulty in concentrating my mind upon my work, and waited uneasily for the end of the week.

"It was on Saturday night that an event occurred which decided the issue of my life. I had been writing for the best part of the day, and had sat at my desk till my head ached, and my cramped hand would scarcely form the characters upon the page before me. I left off at last from sheer exhaustion, and taking a volume at random from the pile of books before me, I began to read. But I had read a very few pages when my heavy eyelids dropped, and I fell into a doze—a doze that deepened into a profound slumber, in which I dreamed of wading knee-deep in a sluggish stream, with a starless sky above me, and a pitiless rain beating down upon my head. Amidst the thick darkness that surrounded me, I saw a light burning feebly in the far distance, and it was towards that distant glimmer I was trying to make my way. But spite of all my struggles I found myself receding rather than advancing, dragged backwards by some horrible weight that hung upon me and paralysed my movements. It was only a very common form of nightmare, I dare say, natural to the condition of an overworked brain; but sometimes I have been weak enough to imagine that the moral of my miserable life was set forth in that uncomfortable dream. I was awakened from it suddenly by the falling of my book, which had slipped from my loosened hand, and had dropped heavily upon the ground.

"There were two sounds in my ears when I awoke,—the pattering of the rain which I had heard in my sleep, and the

sound of hurried knocking at my door. I got up to answer the impatient summons, and on opening the door I beheld a woman, whose figure was undistinguishable under the voluminous folds of a heavy shawl, and whose face was hidden by a thick veil.

"Before I could address her she flung the dripping veil off her face, and I recognised Caroline Catheron.

"'Caroline!' I exclaimed, 'what in Heaven's name has brought you here at such an hour? Your father——'

"'Oh, there is nothing amiss with him, if that is what you mean!' she answered, impatiently, 'though he is the cause of my being here to-night. There is nothing the matter with him except wickedness, and that seems to agree with some people. Let me sit down by your fire, please, Godfrey, and don't stand staring at me as if I were a ghost. Take my shawl,—and now my bonnet,' she said, handing me the dripping garments. 'Have you any woman-servant? No; I remember your charwoman only comes in the morning. However, that's no matter; I shall only stop with you till my shawl is dry, and then I want you to take me to an hotel of some kind, where I can have a lodging. It is not the least use your staring in that absurd manner, Mr. Pierrepont. I'm never going back to Weldridge again, or to any other "dridge" where my papa resides.'

"'But Caroline——'

"She tossed her head impatiently. I had never seen her look more brilliantly handsome than she looked that night in her dark stuff gown, and with her black hair pushed carelessly off her face. I was too much bewildered by her presence to do any thing but stare at her, as she flung herself coolly into the chair in which I had been seated, and planted her wet feet on the fender. There was nothing bold or immodest in her familiarity; it was rather the easy manner of a popular queen who takes refuge in the dwelling of a subject, and is aware that she confers an honour by her presence.

"'It is not the least use your preaching to me about duty, or any thing of that kind,' she exclaimed. 'Come what may, I will never go back to any house in which my father lives. We have been quarrelling ever since I was old enough to quarrel, and on Christmas-eve matters came to a crisis. We have not spoken to each other, except under compulsion, since that night. Of course it's a very dreadful thing for a father and daughter to quarrel as we have done. I know that quite as well as you do; but papa's temper is unendurable to me, and I suppose my temper is unendurable to him. We are too much alike, I think. Papa is a tyrant, and wants to reign supreme among stupid, submissive people, who would never

oppose him ; and I am not submissive ; or stupid, so far as I know ; and the end of it all is, that we cannot exist any longer under the same roof. There's not the faintest reason for you to look so horrified, Godfrey ; I am only going to do what girls in my position—and in more comfortable positions than mine—are doing every day of their lives. I am going out as a governess. If I had proposed such a thing to papa, he would have talked all sorts of pompous nonsense about the Catherons and Edward the Confessor, though he owns himself that Edward the Confessor never was the slightest use to him in any stage of his career. In fact, what papa would like would be for me to wait upon him, and play Mozart to him until my hair was grey, and to submit to be thwarted in the dearest wishes of my heart, and, in short, to be an uncomplaining slave. So, instead of fighting the matter out with him, I quietly left Weldridge by this evening's coach, and have walked from the coach-office here, not having enough money to pay for a cab. So I want you to lend me some money, please ; and I want you to get me some kind of lodging.'

"'But have you no friends in London to whom I could take you, Caroline ?' I asked, looking anxiously at my watch. 'You would be more comfortable in a friend's house than in a strange lodging.'

"'Of course I should,' Miss Catheron answered, impatiently ; 'but I have no friends to whom I can go at ten o'clock on a Saturday night, and say, "I have run away from papa, and I am going out as a governess : please accommodate me in the interval." Those sort of friends are not very common.'

"This was an unanswerable kind of argument ; so I put on my hat and hurried out, after assuring Caroline that I would do my best to secure her safety and comfort. I had only one person to whom to appeal in my dilemma, and that person was my laundress, whose address I fortunately knew. I was also so fortunate as to find her at home, and up ; and having made her my confidante, she informed me that she did know of a humble, but thoroughly respectable lodging, where the young lady could be accommodated at this short notice, and where she would be far less open to suspicion, or exposed to impatient curiosity, than at an hotel.

"'Poor dear young creature,' said the laundress, 'she must be terribly cut up and timid-like, finding herself in London promiscuous like this, and with not a place to lay her pretty head in !'

"I informed the worthy woman that the young lady in question was a very high-spirited young lady, and not prone to timidity. Was I proud of her, or was I ashamed of her, because she was so different from other women ? I can scarcely

tell. I only know that the influence of her presence enslaved me, as the opium-eater's vice enslaves him, even when he knows most surely the ruin which it involves.

"The respectable lodging turned out to be a very tidy place in a little square behind Fleet Street; a quaint old-fashioned little square, so hemmed in and surrounded by taller and more important buildings, that a man might live close to it for half a century without being aware of its existence. I saw the landlady of the lodging-house, and having satisfied myself that she was a respectable and civil person, who would receive Caroline kindly, I parted from my laundress and went back to my chambers.

"I found my divinity sitting by the fire in the same attitude in which I had left her,—a very discontented and moody divinity, and by no means inclined to be enraptured with any arrangements I had made for her comfort. I remember now how completely she ignored any discomfort I might have suffered in my search for her lodging; but in the days of my folly she was as charming to me in her sulkiest temper as in her brightest mood, and I attended her that night with slavish humility, and saw her comfortably installed in her little third-floor sitting-room before I went back to my own chambers. I had taken five golden sovereigns from my hoard, and gave them to her when I wished her good-night. This was something to have worked for, this delightful privilege of ministering to her necessities, however coldly she might receive my service. I went home to think of her and dream of her; and I had the honour of attending her to the Temple Church next day, and of walking with her in the St. James's Park afterwards.

"It was during that walk that I urged upon her all the miseries of the step she contemplated taking; the difficulty of obtaining the assistance of her friends so long as she remained at variance with her father; the utter impossibility of finding any situation without the help and recommendation of friends; and, lastly, the absence of motive for such a course. Was I not at her command, ready to find a home in which she would be no dependant, but sole mistress, if she would only accept a home of my finding? Why should she not marry me at once, I argued; since she was determined not to go back to her father; and since, as she said herself, she was of an age to do what she pleased, without consulting any one? After I had pleaded for a long time, she agreed to consider my proposition and give me an answer on the following day. All that Sunday evening I sat alone in my garret-chamber, unable either to read or write, and with no better occupation than to count the minutes which must elapse before I could know my fate.

"When I called on Caroline the next morning I found her

still irresolute, and had all my pleading to go through again ; but at last I wrung from her a half-unwilling consent to an immediate marriage, and I left her by-and-by, feeling unutterably happy and unutterably important, with an enormous amount of business on my hands. But all at once, now that the critical moment had arrived, I was seized with a sudden feeling of doubt as to whether my father and mother would consent to this early marriage. Was it not almost certain that they would oppose such a step, on the ground of its imprudence—that they would even forbid it? I knew my mother well enough to know that she would wish to become intimately acquainted with Caroline before she received her as a daughter-in-law ; and how could Caroline remain in a square at the back of Fleet Street until my mother could be brought up from Yorkshire to make her acquaintance ; or how could I take my betrothed to Pierrepont an uninvited guest, and in the very doubtful position of a runaway daughter? And then there was another question which I scarcely dared ask myself, so very doubtful was the answer. If there were time and opportunity for my mother to become familiar with Miss Catheron, would the result of the acquaintance be very satisfactory? The changeful temper, the imperious will, which were so charming to me, might fail to fascinate an anxious mother when exhibited by the future wife of her son. Debating my position in long and painful meditations, I became impressed by the conviction that I must follow the dictates of my heart at all hazards, and trust to the future to reconcile matters with my relations. A year ago I should have as soon dreamed of jumping over London Bridge as of marrying without the knowledge or consent of my father and mother. But the bondage of affection and duty was only a spider's web in comparison with the chains that Caroline Catheron had riveted about me ; and I flung every consideration to the winds rather than incur the hazard of losing the woman I loved.

“Early on the following day I made arrangements for our hasty marriage. As I was under age, and there would therefore be difficulty about a license, I had our banns put up at St. Dunstan's ; for though I was base enough to keep the secret of my marriage from my relations, I was not prepared to perjure myself before a proctor. So on the following Sunday, and for two Sundays afterwards, the scanty worshippers in St. Dunstan's Church were asked if they were aware of any just impediment to the marriage of Godfrey Pierrepont, bachelor, and Caroline Catheron, spinster ; and on the fourth Monday after my divinity's arrival in London I stood by her side before the altar, in the semi-obscurity of a black winter's day, while a curate in a dingy surplice joined our hands in surely

the most fatal union that was ever solemnised in that old City church. No one had interfered to prevent our marriage. Of all my father's friends no idle wanderer had entered the church in Fleet Street to be startled and scandalised by hearing the name of Pierrepont amidst a string of Smiths and Joneses; while, on the other hand, Mr. Catheron had taken no step to reclaim his daughter, though he must have been well aware by the cessation of my Sunday visits to Weldridge that I was acquainted with her movements. And she was my wife—mine, my very own! Henceforth I was to be sole proprietor of the flashing eyes, the disdainful red lips: and the temper—with its every capricious change from cloud to sunshine and from sunshine back to cloud. I took my bride to Brighton; and for the two short weeks of our honeymoon I found it a delicious thing to submit to her temper when she chose to be angry with me, and to be forgiven for having done nothing particular when she was tired of being sulky. Before I had time to discover that even these delights can pall, we returned to London, and took possession of a pretty little cottage at Camberwell—a cottage in a green winding lane, with a garden in which there were honeysuckles and roses in the summer time, and which even in February had a pleasant rural aspect. Thus Caroline and I began life together. I still kept the secret of my marriage from my family, trusting to the future for a favourable opportunity in which to disclose it. I left my wife early every morning to walk to the Temple, and returned to her after dark. Even now I cannot think of the dingy streets between the Temple and Blackfriars Bridge or the long dusty road between the bridge and Camberwell Gate, without a shudder, they are so associated with this period of my life, and with the aching heart that I have carried in my breast as I tramped along them. How soon did I discover the fatal mistake that I had made! I look back, and beyond that brief honeymoon period I cannot remember any time in which I did not think how mad a thing my boyish folly had been, and how bitter a price I was to pay for having indulged it. Heaven help the man who marries a beauty! There are beautiful women enough in this world unconscious of their loveliness as the flowers that bloom and fade hidden in the untrodden woods. But from the professed beauty, the conscious enchantress, let man fly as from a pestilence—unless indeed he has a dukedom and some sixty thousand a-year to offer her; and even in that case she may hold him still her debtor. I found what it was to have married a woman who had been from her earliest girlhood impressed with the notion that in her handsome face she possessed the talisman which was to win her rank and fortune.

"From the very day of our marriage Caroline's complaints all harped upon one string—the sacrifice she had made in marrying me. I felt a guilty and dishonourable creature sometimes when she reminded me fretfully of the match she might have made, and the position she might have occupied but for me. The nest-egg of my future fortune was consumed prematurely in the furnishing of our suburban cottage; and the cost of the furniture was about on a level with that of a certain flat in Buccleuch Place, Edinburgh, wherein Francis Jeffrey and his young wife began their housekeeping, and in which modest household the *Edinburgh Review* was concocted. There are women who can invest a simple life with graces and beauties which are wanting in splendid homes; but the poetical side of poverty was beyond my wife's comprehension. It was all bitter, sordid, and miserable. Her ideas of housekeeping were derived from a reckless and extravagant epicurean, who would feast one day and starve the next, and who never paid for anything until he had exhausted his credit. Thus, had I been a man to whom creature-comforts were essential, there might have been good reason for complaint on my side. One of my earliest unpleasant discoveries was the fact of my wife's extravagance. She took a great deal more money from me than I could afford to give her with any regard to prudence; and she deceived me repeatedly as to her disposal of it. Thus, after I had given her money for the payment of bills I found the bills unpaid, and the money invested in an expensive bonnet, or frittered away upon gloves and ribbons. The simple muslin dresses and straw bonnets in which I had admired Miss Catheron were contemptuously cast aside by Mrs. Pierrepont; and I was called mean and cruel when I uttered any remonstrance regarding this change. All this I bore very patiently; but I had more to bear than this. My wife tormented me with perpetual entreaties to apply to my Uncle Weldon for more money. Why should I not ask him for assistance? she said. He was rolling in wealth, her father had told her; and if his two sons died I should be heir presumptive to the estate: though of course it was quite certain that one of the horrid creatures would live, if it was only to keep *her* out of the fortune; for what good luck had ever come to *her*, or ever would, now that she had blighted her whole existence by marrying a pauper? Upon this point, however, my refusal was always decided. I told Caroline that under no circumstances would I apply to my uncle for further help; and I told her also that as soon as I found myself certain of a decent income I should relinquish the hundred a-year he now allowed me. This matter was the cause of frequent disputes between us. Another subject of most bitter com-

plaint with my wife was the dulness of her existence. So long as I kept the secret of my marriage I was unable to introduce her to the society which was open to myself whenever I pleased to avail myself of my family connections. Day by day I grew more averse to any revelation of the step I had taken ; for day by day I felt more certain that Caroline and my mother would never agree. The time would come, of course, when the secret must be told, and when those who loved me so devotedly, and who hoped so fondly in my future, must know how utterly I had wrecked it. I had a terrible foreboding that this knowledge would break my mother's heart ; and it was this fear, rather than any cowardly dread of reproof, which kept me from revealing the change in my position. I paid a brief visit to Pierrepont in the spring after my marriage ; and the calm happiness of my old home seemed to me like a glimpse of heaven.

"Before I had been married six months I knew that my wife hated me. I might have discovered this incidentally in a hundred ways ; but lest a shadow of doubt upon this subject should linger in my mind, the woman whom I had married told me one day in the very plainest terms that she had never loved me ; that she had only married me to revenge herself upon her father, who had hindered her marriage with the man she had loved, and did love, and the mere sound of whose name was a hundred times more to her than I was or ever could be. She told me all this one day after a quarrel which had grown out of her peevish complaints about the petty miseries of her life. She told me these things in utter recklessness ; and lest I should doubt the existence of the lover who was preferred to me, she took a little packet of letters from the desk before which she was sitting, and flung them to me.

" 'Read those,' she said, 'and you will learn what a man can feel for the woman he loves. Those letters were written by a man with a heart and soul—not a dull plodder, not a miserable bookworm, who leaves his wife day after day to bury himself among his mouldy old volumes. Those letters are dearer to me now than any thing in the world. I read them every day while you are away from me ; and at night when you are sitting with your head buried in your books, I sit opposite to you and think about him. I am a very wicked woman, am I not ? Did I ever tell you I was good ? Did I not tell you a hundred times that I was utterly unfit for the life you could give me and that poverty and dulness would drive me mad ?'

"She had lashed herself into a kind of half-hysterical fury which was horribly familiar to me now, and she was pacing up and down the little room very much as a beautiful leopardess paces her den ; quite as beautiful, quite as wicked-looking as

the leopardess. I held the little packet in my hand,—a slender packet of letters that were worn and soiled by frequent handling,—a packet of some half-dozen letters tied together with a faded and attenuated ribbon. Upon the topmost envelope there appeared a greasy little circle, which indicated the presence of that most primitive and inexpensive of love-tokens, a slender ring of hair cut from a lover's head. I lifted the envelopes one by one, and looked at the address and post marks upon each. They were addressed to Miss Catheron at a terrace in Kensington, and the post-marks upon them were dated a year before our marriage. Having ascertained this I tossed the little packet into the hollow of the fire, and thrust it down with the poker.

"My wife sprang towards me, more like a leopardess even than before ; and I knew by the attitude in which she paused, drawn back for a final spring that she was afraid to take, as well as by the nervous contraction of her slim fingers, that she would have liked to have struck me.

"We measured our powers of resistance that night for the first time. Until that hour I had been true to my position of a slave who submits to the despotism of his imperial mistress. But on that night the first spark of manhood was fired in my breast ; the invisible bondage which had held me so long dropped away from me all in a moment, and from that moment I assumed a new position towards my wife.

"She looked at me with rage and astonishment blended in her face.

"How dare you burn those letters !' she cried. 'They were mine !'

"Mrs. Pierrepont has no occasion to retain love-letters addressed to Miss Catheron,' I answered. 'I claim the right to destroy every thing that my wife has no right to keep.'

"Oh, how I hate you ! how I hate you !' she exclaimed, coming close up to me with the gliding cat-like step which I had admired as one of her charms. 'I married you because I was angry with my father for standing between me and the man I loved ; because I never could forget or forgive that wrong : the bitter wrong which was the beginning and end of all our quarrels. And I married you because I was angry with *him* too ; for if he had really loved me, he would never have let me go so easily. I married you because I hated myself and all the world ; and because it was a mad and desperate thing to do, like jumping over Waterloo Bridge, or drinking corrosive sublimate. Poor pitiful fool ! could you be weak enough to think that I loved you ?'

"I was weak enough to think you a good woman. Whether you love me or not will be a very small question

to me henceforward; but I shall know how to make you respect me.'

"From that hour my feelings with regard to my wife changed as utterly as if I myself had become a new man. I had been slavishly submissive to the capricious tempers of a coquette; but I revolted entirely against the insults of an unloving wife. There are men who will brook such insults, and cling with a base cowardly passion to the shrew who inflicts them; there are men who will accept the outward graces of the beauty that won them as a counterpoise to all inward hideousness: but I was not one of these. I had lived rapidly since my first meeting with Caroline Catheron: and from her father's cynical talk, and from her own unprincipled sentiments, I had acquired exactly the kind of knowledge which could never have come to me at Pierrepont, even if I had existed there for half a century. After the burning of the letters my wife and I lived very much as we had lived before; for the fact that my passionate boyish love had utterly perished made very little difference in the dull current of our lives. I kept my word, and I taught Caroline to respect me. She grumbled still about our poverty; she exaggerated every little deprivation; but her complaints had lost their old power to wound me, for I no longer loved her. I listened submissively to what she had to say, and I did my best to make her life pleasant to her; but her unhappiness had ceased to be my keenest anguish; her pleasure was no longer my dearest joy. Do you know the resistance there is in a little field-flower which blooms half hidden among the grass? You may tread on it once, twice, thrice, a dozen times perhaps, and the elastic blossom will lift its head and go on blooming after your ill-usage; but trample on it just a little *too* ruthlessly, and it perishes beneath your foot, never to come back to life and beauty again. I sometimes think that love is such a blossom, and there are women to whom power is so sweet a thing that they must needs tread on the flower once too often.

"I had ceased to love my wife; and I was all the happier for the death of my ill-starred passion. My soul seemed to have escaped from bondage. I went back to my books with all my old zest. The mighty shadows came back to me. I was no longer the dull plodder I had been while my mind was occupied by Caroline's image, and I worked against the grain. I was an enthusiast and a dreamer once more; and the editors for whom I worked congratulated me on the new fire which they perceived in my writing. Day by day I advanced, by some small step, on the path of literature. Success of a certain kind came to me, and in liberal measure. My earnings had been trebled within the past six months, and I gave my

wife the full benefit of my improved position. But do what you may for the horseleech's daughters, the cry will still be 'Give!' If I took Caroline to the pit of the opera, she was unhappy because she was not in the stalls; if I took her to the stalls, she bewailed the hardship of her fate as compared with that of a woman who had her box for the season. It is very difficult for a struggling man to satisfy a pampered beauty, who thinks she ought to have married a nobleman with sixty thousand a-year. I tried to do my duty, and there was something like peace in our household; for Caroline had discovered that there was a certain point at which her complainings must cease. Our mode of life had been in every way improved since the first days of our marriage. We kept two experienced women-servants now, in place of the maid-of-all-work who had been our only attendant. I added many small luxuries to my wife's simply-furnished rooms; and I paid a florist liberally for the cultivation of our small garden. There are many young wives who would have taken a tender pleasure in such a home as ours. I think of you, Marcia, in that rustic cottage; and I can fancy you happier in those unpretending chambers than you could be in a palace.

"We had been married a year, when Providence bestowed upon me the most precious gift I ever received from the hands of Heaven; except your love, Marcia,—except your love! I went home one evening in the bleak winter weather to find lights in the upper windows, while darkness and confusion reigned below; and to be told that I was the father of a son. There are subjects whose first pain never grows less. When I think of my only child, all the anguish connected with his brief existence comes back to me; and I feel the bitterness of my first great grief to-night as deeply as I felt it when the wound was new.

"For the first month of the child's existence his mother seemed inclined to be pleased and amused with him; and my heart softened to something of its old tenderness when I saw her sitting with her baby in her arms. I would gladly have relaxed my labours in some measure, in order to spend more time with my wife and child; but Caroline's extravagance kept me tied to the mill, and, work as I would, I could not earn enough to keep myself free from debt. I was of age by this time, and had been called to the bar; but my first brief had not yet come to me, and it was literature rather than law which occupied me daily at my Temple chambers, and very often deep into the night at home.

"My son was two months old, and already a faint smile of recognition had begun to dawn upon his face when I took him

in my arms. Caroline was beginning to show considerable weariness of her new duties: and I heard all the old complaints about want of society and want of money, when an event occurred which delighted my wife, and made no inconsiderable addition to our expenses.

"Caroline's twin sister, the wife of Captain Fane, came home from India with her little girl, and volunteered to pay us a visit. As I was very glad to give my wife any reasonable pleasure, I united cordially in the preparations for Mrs. Fane's reception; and if I could have worked harder than I had been working for the last year of my life, I would have done so. A room was prettily furnished for our expected visitor, and a rather alarming invoice from the upholsterer reminded me that I was getting deeper into debt; but my wife promised me that she would retrench after her sister's departure, and I resigned myself at the cost of her pleasure. That she should be pleased in any innocent womanly manner was my highest wish; for the knowledge of the change in my own heart made me peculiarly anxious to do my duty to the woman I had once so devotedly loved.

I came home one evening to find a lady sitting by the fire in the spring twilight—a lady whom I addressed as my wife. But something in her manner of rising and coming towards me was so unlike my wife—who rarely acknowledged my return by anything but a peevish shrug of her shoulders and the remark that I was later than usual—that I understood at once the lady was my visitor. The likeness between the twin sisters was something extraordinary, so extraordinary that in the dim twilight I had difficulty in believing that the woman who stood before me was indeed a stranger. I saw afterwards that Mrs. Fane's complexion had a pale sallow tint, which made her beauty less gorgeous than the red-and-white loveliness of her sister. Nor was this the only difference between the two women; for I discovered ere long that in the expression the two faces were dissimilar. Caroline's was the countenance of a weak frivolous woman; Leonora's was the index of a resolute and powerful character.

Mrs. Fane had placed her little girl at a school at Brixton, and after remaining with us six weeks as our guest, she persuaded Caroline to allow her to remain in the character of a boarder. I did not like this arrangement; for in the first place, the pride of the Pierreponts revolted against anything like the sale of meat and drink, as the pride of an Arab might revolt against accepting payment for the sacred bread and salt bestowed on the stranger; and in the second place Mrs. Fane's presence in our household involved us in extravagances which her payments by no means counterbalanced. But I submitted

to this ; as I submitted always to any reasonable desire of the wife I had ceased to love.

"I knew that the two women often quarrelled, but on the whole they seemed happy together ; and it pleased me to think, while I bent over my desk in the Temple, that my wife was not without a suitable companion. For myself I had considerable difficulty in overcoming an instinctive dislike of Leonora Fane. I fancied her manners artificial, her smile false, her laugh hollow, her conversation stereotyped and conventional ; but she was scrupulously polite and deferential in her conduct towards me, and the first impression faded out in our daily intercourse, until I began to think her really a very agreeable woman, whose easy temper my wife might do well to emulate.

"From the time of my sister-in-law's arrival, I heard no more lamentations upon the want of visitors to our little household. Several of Mrs. Fane's friends came to see her, and I dreaded every day that through some of these people the news of my marriage might reach Pierrepont. I heard very often when I went home of the callers who had been during the day, and I speedily began to take notice that amongst these visitors the gentlemen were in the majority. This perplexed me ; and one evening, trifling absently with the little card-basket on my wife's table, I was startled by discovering that half the cards in it—and it evidently contained the accumulation of some weeks—were inscribed with one name, and that the name of a gentleman, a barrister of the Middle Temple, a certain Mr. Arthur Holroyde, whose name I had never heard or seen in any legal capacity, and whom I imagined to be as briefless a barrister as myself. I called my wife's attention to the number of the cards, and I asked her how this Mr. Holroyde happened to call so often, and whether she thought Captain Fane would quite approve any gentleman making such frequent visits to his wife. Caroline expressed extreme indignation at this suggestion. It was utterly preposterous and absurd, she said. Mr. Holroyde's visits to Leonora were the most ordinary visits in the world. Indeed, she added, he came to see her quite as much as her sister.

"'In that case,' I said, 'I must beg to object to the number of his visits within the past few weeks ; and I think as you are now subject to the morning calls of Captain Fane's Indian friends, it will be better for me to do my work at home, and thus be at hand to assist in the reception of your visitors.'

"I could see that this displeased my wife, though she was silent. From this day I altered my plan of life. My chief reason for spending the greater part of my time at the Temple had been the fact that there alone I found perfect peace and

quiet. I now appropriated a little den of a back-parlour as my study ; and I gave my wife to understand that the apartment must be kept sacred to me. In this den I worked, and from this den I emerged occasionally when Mrs. Fane's visitors were in the drawing-room. I found her friends chiefly of the Anglo-Indian order, and I saw no reason to resent their presence in my house.

"For some weeks after this change in our arrangements I heard nothing of Mr. Holroyde. My habits at home by degrees became the counterpart of my habits in the Temple. I worked alone all day, shut as completely from the outer world in my little back-parlour as in my attic-chambers ; and Mrs. Fane's visitors came and went unheeded by me. Our dinner-hour was very late ; to suit my convenience my wife said. Sometimes Caroline and her sister were out all day ; sometimes I heard them playing and singing together in the little drawing-room. If ever I broke in upon them I found them pleasantly and innocently amused ; if ever I questioned my wife as to the time she spent away from home I received satisfactory answers. But one day, coming into the drawing-room unexpectedly, I found Mr. Holroyde installed there, and a great deal more at his ease than I thought Captain Fane would have cared to see any man in the society of his wife. He was standing by the piano, and bending over Leonora as she played. I had heard the sound of the instrument all through the morning, and had therefore concluded that my wife and her sister were alone. I think I knew instinctively who this man was before he was introduced to me. He was a tall elegant-looking man of about five-and-thirty, with a long pale face, neither handsome nor ill-looking, but one of those faces which set people thinking—the face of a man who must inevitably make a strong impression of some kind or other upon the world in which he lives. His manner was peculiarly soft and conciliating—the sort of manner that women generally call fascinating : and in the little conversation which followed my introduction to him I had reason to conclude that he was clever and well-informed ; but his cleverness was of a light airy kind, utterly different from that to which I had been accustomed in my father.

"When he was gone I asked Mrs. Fane if he had ever been in India, and she told me no. He was not a Calcutta acquaintance : he was an old friend of her husband's, whom she had known before her marriage. She praised him highly, but with an air of perfect indifference ; and I concluded that Captain Fane had, after all, no occasion for displeasure.

"But after this Mr. Holroyde came very often ; and meeting the servant in the hall one day, immediately after she had ushered him into the drawing-room, I asked who the

visitor was. The girl had some difficulty in remembering his name.

“‘Mr. Hol—Mr. Holroy,’ she stammered.—‘Mr.—Oh, dear, how stupid I am!—the gentleman who comes nearly every day, Sir.’

“I was very angry when I heard this, and I remonstrated with my wife upon the subject that afternoon; but she received my remonstrances with an impenetrable sulkiness; and I determined to take some decisive step. I went to the Temple early the next morning, and called upon my father's old friend, the legal celebrity. He received me kindly; and without any special explanation of my reason for asking such questions, I begged him to tell me whether he was acquainted with Arthur Holroyde, and whether he knew anything to that gentleman's discredit. The old man's answer was most decisive.

“‘If you consider it to a man's discredit to be a thorough-paced scoundrel,’ he said, ‘I know that much of Mr. Arthur Holroyde; and if you are in any way mixed up with him, all I can say is, you had better get yourself out of the connection as soon as you can.’

“After this he told me that Arthur Holroyde belonged to a good family; and that he had spent a fortune about town; that he had degenerated from a gentlemanly dupe into a gentlemanly black-leg; that he was plausible and dangerous, false and cowardly; that the slightest association with his name was death to a woman's reputation; that anything like friendship for himself was certain ruin to a man.

“I went home after hearing this and told my wife and her sister that Mr. Holroyde must never again be received under my roof. Mrs. Fane, I said, was her own mistress, and if she insisted upon receiving him, she could take up her abode elsewhere; but if she would permit me the privilege of a brother-in-law, I should certainly most earnestly recommend her to resign that gentleman's acquaintance. Leonora Fane listened to this with perfect good-temper. She told me with a careless laugh that Mr. Holroyde was perfectly indifferent to her. She added that she had certainly made arrangements for leaving us in the course of the following week, but her only reason for so doing was the desire to give her little girl a change of air at some pleasant watering-place, where she hoped I would take my wife. I had addressed myself chiefly to Mrs. Fane, and I was in no way surprised by Caroline's silence. Nothing further was said upon the subject of Mr. Holroyde; but there was a little stiffness in my intercourse with my sister-in-law after this, and I was considerably relieved by her departure, which took place within a few days.

“A new source of anxiety arose for me about this time, the

commencement of my great sorrow. Amidst all the dis-illusions of my married life, my baby-son had been the one sweet reality—the one deep and pure joy; and I loved him with a passionate fondness that an infant rarely inspires in the breast of a father. My wife had for some time felt a capricious kind of fondness for the child, which had grown weaker with every day of its weakly life. To half smother it with caresses at one time, and to forget its existence at another, was only natural to such a person as Caroline. But as the infant's health grew week by week more delicate, the mother's love gave place to a peevish impatience of the trouble and anxiety involved in this feeble little life, which needed as careful watching as the flame of a candle flickering in a current of air. A few days after Mrs. Fane's departure, my boy grew worse than he had been yet. I cannot enter into the details of these infantine maladies, though, Heaven knows, no nurse or doctor ever watched their progress more closely than I have done. The medical man whom I consulted told me that the child's health depended in a considerable degree upon the mother's, and asked me if my wife's mind had been disturbed of late. He had asked her the same question, he told me; for her manner had led him to infer that she had been subject to some mental disturbance; but she had appeared much offended by the suggestion. After this interview, I tried to awaken my wife to the consciousness of her child's danger. I was talking to stone. With an agony that was more bitter than any I had ever before suffered at the hands of this woman, I discovered that my boy's fate was utterly indifferent to her. I perceived this; and yet in the next moment I believed that her indifference was affected,—a mere bravado assumed to annoy me. I thought this; for though I knew the woman I had married to be an unloving wife, I could not believe her an unloving mother. Then I made my first and last appeal to the better feelings of this creature. I implored her to perform the sweetest duties of womanhood. I was willing to allow much for her defective education; I was ready to admit her right to a brighter life than that which I could give her in the present. And then I offered her my future. I reminded her of the pathways to fortune that were opening for me on every side; I told her the promises that had been made to me by men who held fame and wealth in the palms of their hands; I told her that, if she would be a good mother, my dearest hope should be to win the affection she had never yet given me, and to love her again as I had loved her at first. I told her this, and I entreated her to believe in my power to win for her the position she aspired to, the pleasures and grandeurs she had a right to expect. I was weak enough to believe that I had indeed wronged her in some

degree by shutting her from the chance of making a better marriage. 'Only save my boy,' I entreated, 'and be patient.'

"'Yes,' she cried, contemptuously; 'and I suppose, when I am an old woman, you will give me a house in Russell Square, and a great blundering carriage that would look like a tub when it was open, and a mourning-coach when it was shut. I have seen poor milk-and-water creatures who have married "rising men," and who have begun to enjoy life just when women of spirit would be thinking of dying.'

"This conversation took place when my boy was very ill. After this, his mother made some little show of attending to him; but I could see that her mind was distracted, and I vainly endeavoured to discover the cause of her distraction. To me her manner was more coldly insolent than it had ever been yet, and there was something in her tone of defiance which reminded me painfully of the manner of a servant to whom Caroline had given notice of dismissal. If my heart and mind had not been so absorbed by love and anxiety for my boy, I might perhaps have discovered a clue to my wife's conduct; and yet I doubt if any freedom of mind would have enabled me to understand a woman who was so different from the mother beneath whose care my boyhood had been passed. I believed my wife to be weak, selfish, passionate, and vain; but I suspected no hidden treachery lurking darkly beneath those unconcealed vices.

"My boy rallied a little, and I began to hope. I had neglected my work during the child's illness; for the little fellow knew me, and smiled at me, and I fancied he was pleased to have me sitting by his cot. One long summer day I sat with him thus from noon till sunset, with my books on the table by my side, but infinitely more occupied by the child's presence than by them. On this particular day Caroline shared my watch, and sat at the foot of the little cot, looking sometimes at me, and sometimes at the child, with a wan haggard face, in which I could see the traces of anxiety. My heart was softened towards her by the sight of her altered aspect. She did love the child, after all, I thought; and her affected indifference had been the result of ill-temper. I approached her, and tried to take her hand; but she repulsed me fiercely, and preserved a sulky silence all through the day. The sun was setting when she flung herself upon the ground with a sudden energy that was almost terrible, and began to beat her head with her clenched hands.

"'Oh, what a wicked wretch I am!' she cried; 'how wicked, how wicked, how wicked!'

"I knelt beside her, and lifted her in my arms; but to do so needed all the strength which has since served me in a close

grapple with a wild-boar. Her whole frame was convulsed by the violence of her passion ; but she grew calm presently, and when I tried to reason with her, and to discover the cause of her agitation, she lapsed back into the sulky silence that was so common to her, and by neither command nor entreaty could I wring a word from her lips. By-and-by she softened a little, and sat with her infant in her arms, crying over him ; and when it had grown quite dark she kissed him, laid him gently, sleeping, in his nurse's arms, and left the nursery.

"After this I went down stairs to my den, lighted my lamp, and set to work. My literary labours had fallen into arrears, and it was only by writing all night that I could keep my engagements. I wrote first by lamplight, and then by daylight, until the little clock on the chimneypiece struck seven, when I lay down on a sofa in the warm summer sunshine, and fell into a sound slumber. When I awoke, it was late in the forenoon, and I heard the cries of hawkers and the sound of wheels in the distance. I went into our common sitting-room. The breakfast-table was laid for one, and nothing upon it had been disturbed. I opened the door, and called my wife by her name. The housemaid came to answer my summons.

"*'My mistress went out last night, Sir,'* she said ; *'and I don't think she's coming back for some days. I believe she's gone to Mrs. Fane. But there's a note behind one of the vases on the mantelpiece.'*

"I went back to the sitting-room, and found my wife's letter. Did I guess what had happened, before I broke the seal ? I scarcely know. All that most hideous time is dim and confused in my mind, as I try to recall it. The letter contained only a few lines ; but it told me that my wife had left me for ever with the lover of her youth.

"Before nightfall I was on my way to Lyme Regis, where Mrs. Fane and her little girl were staying. I found my sister-in-law ; but though I know now, and though I knew instinctively then, that she was acquainted with my wife's movements, I could not wring a word from her. After my useless interview with this woman, I searched England and that part of the Continent which is most affected by English travellers, for the wife who had betrayed me ; but in vain. I came back to England utterly worn-out by my useless wanderings, to find that my poor fragile boy had pined and drooped from the hour of his mother's desertion, and had died within a week of her flight. And I came back to find a letter waiting for me—a letter posted from America, and addressed to me in the handwriting of a man. The letter itself was written by my wife ; and surely never, before or since, did a woman's hand so coldly and deliberately set forth a woman's sin. As I read

those studied lines, so hideous in their effrontery, so revolting in their affected candour, I knew that I was reading an epistle in which my wife's brain had had little part, though my wife's hand had written the words. I recognised the carefully-prepared composition of a hard-headed, false-hearted scoundrel in whose power Caroline Pierrepont was the poorest automaton that ever obeyed the guiding-strings of a showman. Upon my knees, with this vile letter clasped in my uplifted hand, I swore to inflict a fitting chastisement on the man who had dictated it. Who he was, how he had corresponded with my weak and wicked wife since her marriage, I had as yet no idea; but my memory helped me with regard to his hand writing, and I knew that it was his hand which had addressed the little packet of letters I had burned unread. A sudden fancy flashed upon me that night of my miserable return, as I sat brooding over my wife's infamous letter; and I went early the next morning to my father's friend in the Temple. Of him I again inquired about Arthur Holroyde, and I learned that he had left England some weeks before, deeply in debt, and obliged to fly from the chance of imprisonment. He had been since declared an outlaw. Following up this clue patiently and resolutely, I discovered that beyond a doubt Arthur Holroyde was the man who had sailed for America with my wife. I ascertained the name of the vessel that had carried them, the port at which they had landed. Having discovered so much, my course was clear; and for two weary unprofitable years my life was one long pursuit of the man who had wronged me.

"I followed this man and his most wretched companion from city to city and from state to state; guided sometimes by positive intelligence, wandering idly at other times in the vague hope of being aided by accident. Travelling thus, with the same purpose always in my mind, I visited every city in the United States, and made my way through Spanish America. I knew that Arthur Holroyde had taken his passage to New York under an assumed name, and that the people whom I was seeking called themselves Mr. and Mrs. Howell. I heard of them for the last time at Buenos Ayres; and though I had no positive intelligence upon the point, I concluded they had left that place for Europe. I could form no conjecture as to what vessel they had sailed by, or whither they had gone; and I came back to England hopeless of any successful climax to my long chase. I suppose the days of duelling were utterly gone by even then, Marcia, and that if I had met that man face to face there would have been only a brief war of words, and a little windfall in the way of business for our solicitors. And yet, looking back to what I was in those days, I am inclined to wonder whether we two could have met without

some deadlier mischief. I never thought of this while I was looking for my enemy; I only knew that I wanted to find him.

"I came back to England. I had kept up a spasmodic kind of correspondence with home and dear home friends during my wretched wanderings; but my father and mother believed that I was travelling for my own pleasure, and I was obliged to fill my letters with long descriptions of places which I only saw like streets and buildings in a dream. There were times when I was not equal to do this; there were times when a dull despair came down upon my soul, and I was stupidly indifferent to all the past, incapable of remembering or comprehending any thing except the present. Thus it was that my correspondence with home had been utterly irregular; and when I turned my back upon the mighty lands, compared to which my own dear island seemed such a speck upon the universe, six months had gone by since I had received news from home. Black-edged letters had come to me during my absence from England,—one announcing the death of my Uncle Weldon at Madeira; the other, the death of his eldest boy at Ventnor. The two events had occurred almost simultaneously. I felt only a brief pang of regret when I received these sad tidings. What time had I to bewail the loss of the kindred I had once tenderly loved? The thought that only one frail life stood between my bookworm father and the Pierrepont estate never entered my mind. I do not think I should have thought of it under any circumstances; I know that I never thought of it as it was.

"I went back to England. My old friend in the Temple could give me no information about Arthur Holroyde, except that he had not been heard of in London since my departure, and that even his creditors had ceased to talk of him or trouble themselves about him. I ran down to Pierrepont, and found my mother sitting under the apple-blossoms in the dear old garden. For one brief moment she was alarmed by the aspect of the gaunt bearded creature who held out his arms towards her, but in the next instant she was sobbing on my breast. I stopped at Pierrepont for a week; but in all my visit I felt like a creature who had come back from the grave, and who had no part in the joys or sorrows of the living. My love for my mother was unweakened by our separation, but I had resolved to keep the wretched story of my marriage locked in my own breast; and the consciousness of carrying this secret load upon my mind oppressed me like the sense of some bodily burden.

"I saw my cousin, the young Lord of Pierrepont, and the lad's talk of his own grand future, and the new glory he was to

win for our name by his triumphs as a statesman, wounded me as keenly as if every word had been chosen for my special torment. There was no old pleasure, no tender memory in the familiar home, which did not transform itself into a weapon for my pain and punishment. I left my fragile cousin lying on a sofa in the great oriel window, with a pile of blue-books by his side, flushed with feverish enthusiasm, and inexpressibly happy in the contemplation of a future that never was to be. I left my mother weeding her flower-beds, in a cotton gown, within call of my father's study-window, innocently happy in the simplest and purest life that ever woman led; and I left Pierrepont resolved that I would never enter it again. What had I and my dishonour to do in the place where my name had been for centuries the symbol of all earthly pride and splendour?

"I went back to London. I abandoned all thought of finding Arthur Holroyde. Perhaps my thirst for vengeance or redress had exhausted itself, as every passion will exhaust itself sooner or later, in bodily fatigue and mental wear and tear. I settled back into my old chambers, poorer than when I had entered them first, and deeply in debt; for I had mortgaged years of my literary labour in order to borrow the funds that had supported me in my wanderings. I settled back to my old work in my old rooms; and the only difference in me or my life was the fact that I was an old man instead of a young one. There are happy people who count their lives by years. The record of *my* existence is the record of my misery and my shame.

"I had been settled in my old chambers for six or eight months, when a letter from my father brought me the news of my cousin's death. I had seen him, and I had seen the fatal flush upon his face, the death-light in his mild blue eyes; but I had never contemplated the chances of the future. How could I desire wealth, since the unremitting labour that was necessary to my existence was the chief blessing of my life? Bending over my desk, I forgot what a blighted wretch I was. Carried away by that fairy wand—the pen, I entered lofty regions in which Caroline Catheron and her wickedness had no place.

"On the receipt of my father's letter, I felt the bitterness of my position more deeply than I had ever felt it yet, for he told me that my cousin had left me his private fortune, and that his last and dearest wish, expressed a few hours before his death, had been that I should stand for the North Riding, and enter the House as the representative of the Pierreponts, and the advocate of those principles which had been so dear to his own heart.

"The estate to which my father succeeded, when the last of the Weldon Pierreponts had been laid in the family vault, was one of the finest in the North Riding; the fortune which my cousin left to me was more than enough for any man with moderate desires. And I was expected to go back to Pierrepont, to take my place by my father's side, and to carry out the dying wish of my kinsman.

"I was now rich enough to obtain a divorce, even in those days when to be set free from a false wife was so costly a measure; but I could not bring myself to drag my shameful secret into the light of day. I could not offer my bleeding heart for vivisection in the law courts; I could not trail the name of Pierrepont through the infected by-ways that could alone lead me to liberty. I wanted to go back to my native place with my head erect. Could I do that, if every boor in the village were able to point to me as the man who had just been divorced from a runaway wife? And my father's sense of a share in my disgrace, and my mother's sorrow—could I bear those? No! I knew the full pressure of my present burden, and it weighed on myself alone. I knew this, and I was resolved to bear it patiently to the end. The thought that I should ever wish to be set free from my wife, for any reason except that it was a shameful thing to be allied to her, never entered my mind. The future which I saw before me was only a flat sunless plain, upon which I must tramp onwards till I dropped.

"I stayed in London for some weeks after the change in my fortunes, quite unchanged as to my habits. I paid my debts, and prepared for an early departure on those travels which have occupied so many years of my life. I told my father and mother nothing of my intended exile—for I had no reason to advance for the course I was about to take—and I determined to write only when I had started on my African journey. While I was busy with my preparations for a long and perhaps dangerous expedition, I received two visits,—one from Harold Catheron, who said he had lately returned from the Continent, to hear of my good fortune, and who told me a plausible story of his own virtues as a father, and his daughter's ill-treatment. He could tell me nothing of Caroline's whereabouts; and he had been deserted most cruelly, he said, by her sister Leonora, who was now a widow, with a small income. The purport of his visit was to ask me for money. I gave it; and he was a pensioner upon me till he died. Do not think that I take credit for this. I paid him to keep my secret, and to hold his tongue when the name of Pierrepont was uttered in his hearing. A few days after my father-in-law's visit I received another visitor in the person

of Mrs. Fane. For two minutes after she had entered the room, I believed that my wife was standing before me : and it was only when I looked at the card which had been put into my hand that I knew who my visitor was. She too had heard of my good fortune, and came to appeal to me in behalf her sister.

"I listened to her patiently, even when she uttered such phrases as 'remorse for the dreadful past,' 'the deepest penitence that ever a woman felt,' the 'mad mistake of an ill-directed mind.' I let her say these things. I was patient even when she hinted at forgiveness ; though I knew what, in her mind, forgiveness meant. Forgiveness ! I hoped she might be able to tell me something of Arthur Holroyde ; but she could tell me nothing, except that he and her sister had parted in Buenos Ayres, and that the woman who had been my wife had found herself penniless and friendless in a strange city, and had been glad to come back to England as maid to a lady making the homeward passage. Mrs. Fane tried to make me believe that this separation had been a voluntary act on the part of her sister. I did not dispute the fact.

"In answer to Mrs. Fane's appeal, I told her that I was willing to allow my wife an income which would enable her to live in comfort and respectability ; on the understanding that she should for ever abandon the name of Pierrepont, and all claim to any family connection therewith ; and that she should promise to reside abroad, where her name and her story would be alike unknown. I explained to my sister-in-law how easily I could obtain a divorce, had I chosen to endure the scandal attached to it, but that I did not so choose. I told her that the income allowed to her sister should be seven hundred and fifty pounds a-year—the half of my own income ; and that if ever I succeeded to a larger fortune, I would double that allowance, always supposing that Caroline Pierrepont led a creditable life, and kept the secret of her relationship to me. These conditions were very readily agreed to by Mrs. Fane on the part of her sister, and in the course of a few days the matter was entirely settled. I placed the business in the hands of a solicitor whom I could trust, and who did not know the real name of the Mrs. Howell to whom he sent a quarterly letter of credit on a foreign banker. Mrs. Fane and her sister departed for the Continent as soon as the arrangements had been completed, and I started for Marseilles on the first stage of my African expedition.

"From that time until the night on which I crossed the threshold of Scarsdale Hermitage, the story of my life has

been a history of lonely wanderings in desolate and dangerous places. I have plunged twice into the heart of Africa ; once across the deserts to the Atlas Range and to those unmapped mountains from which the Niger springs : once through Abyssinia to the great lake regions of the Central Plateau. I have spent years without seeing an European face. I have passed through all the dangers that are known to man : the sand-storms of the Sahara ; the poisonous breath of mangrove swamps ; the fury of hunted beasts ; the jealousy of fanatics ; the superstition of savages ; long days of famine and thirst and exposure, and disease and wounds which would not close, and pains which never ceased. For fifteen years I was a wanderer on the face of the earth. A letter reached me now and then from home. My own letters bore some record of my adventures back to the home in which my absence was so bitter a sorrow. I thank God even now that neither my father nor my mother ever knew the cause of my wandering life. They believed that I was possessed by a mania for perilous travel ; and they lived and died in the expectation that I should return and settle down into an orthodox Pierrepont at last. My father's death made me one of the richest men in the North Riding ; and the mail that brought me tidings of his loss brought me also a letter from Mrs. Fane, claiming on her sister's behalf the increased income I had promised on my inheritance of Pierrepont. In the course of my exile I met a man who had known Leonora Fane in Bengal ; and from him I heard how base and treacherous a creature I had admitted into my home when I welcomed my wife's sister. From him I heard that Colonel Fane, infinitely wiser than myself, had carried the story of his wrongs into the House of Commons, and had set himself free from a wretched wife. After this, I thought a little more mercifully of the woman who had been my wife, and was inclined to believe her the weak victim of an evil counsellor, rather than the defiant sinner I had once considered her.

"Pity me, Marcia, if you can. I have told you the story of my life ; but the story of my heart and mind would be too long, too dreary for telling. Until I saw you, I bore my burden patiently. Since then—No, I have no right to speak of myself since then.

"I shall go back to my old existence. Nature, the old comforter, shall take me back to her giant arms. I will not ask you to forget me. I entreat you only to forgive me ; and to remember that there is no hour of the day or night in which you do not occupy the thoughts of a man in whose desolate heart every thought of you shapes itself into a prayer."

CHAPTER XXII.

"AND YET MY DAYS GO ON, GO ON."

MARCIA DENISON read the last line of Godfrey Pierrepont's confession with the summer dawn upon her face, and the fresh breath of the morning breeze blowing in upon her through the open windows. Throughout that dreary record of a blighted life no tear of hers had fallen on the page; but at the last—at the very last—her eyes grew dim, and two big drops rolled slowly down her cheeks and fell on that passage in which the wanderer promised to think of her and pray for her.

And from this moment all was over. The brief romance of her life closed with the close of Godfrey Pierrepont's story. Henceforward he was to be a wanderer upon this earth, and she was not even to know the scene of his wandering. He was to die alone and friendless, and she had no hope of knowing either the hour or the place of his death. While she fancied him oppressed by the suffocating blasts of the desert, he might be freezing in the awful solitude of the arctic zone; while she thought of him as a living presence, he might be lying dead in the trackless depths of some tropical forest, with foul crawling creatures eating their way into his heart.

She was never to see him any more. As she lay awake in the broad morning sunlight, her lips shaped themselves into the cruel phrase—Never more! never more! Her life, which had been elevated into a new existence by his affection, was to drop back into its old dull course; and the magical influence of his love, which had illumined the commonest things with a kind of radiance, was to fade out and leave all things upon this earth duller and drearier than they had been to her before. For a little time she thought of her loss and sorrow with a dull despair. It seemed as if the link between herself and Godfrey Pierrepont had been something more than a mutual affection arising out of their own hearts alone. Her instinctive faith in him, her tender reverence for him, seemed to belong to something higher and holier than the every-day emotions of this common earth. She had permitted herself to think that Heaven had destined her to be this man's companion and consoler, and that the impulse which drew her towards him was an instinct implanted in her breast by her

Creator : and having once given admission to this thought, the foolish fancy had absorbed her mind—for it is so sweet to believe that our own happiness is a predestined joy, which we have only to receive in unquestioning thankfulness. And after having indulged this delicious fancy, the pain of an irrevocable parting was very bitter. A widow mourning for her lost husband could scarcely have suffered a keener sorrow than that which bowed Marcia Denison's head as the slow days that carried Godfrey Pierrepont farther away from her wore themselves wearily out.

But she bore her sorrow with a meek heroism, which was an attribute of her character. She had been so accustomed to be sorrowful, and to keep the secret of her grief. Even those who knew her best had no suspicion of the truth.

Sir Jasper flung the burden of fatherly anxiety upon his medical man as coolly as he flung his business-letters to the solicitor who answered them.

"My daughter is not herself, Mr. Redmond," he said to the respectable old family-surgeon, who had inspected the Baronet's tongue with the same aspect of mournful earnestness, and sighed the same plaintive little sigh over the Baronet's pulse three times a week for the last twelve months ; "and I really do beg that you will make a point of seeing that she becomes herself at the earliest opportunity. She's as grey and chalky as a third-rate portrait in the Royal Academy. Can't you warm her up a little with some nice yellows—tonics, I should say ?"

The surgeon shook his head.

"There is a want of tone, Sir Jasper," he murmured ; "an evident want of tone."

"Of course there is, man," answered the Baronet peevishly ; "I can see that as well as you can ; and there used to be a good deal of feeling in those cool pearly greys of hers. She doesn't complain, and she's very attentive to me, and reads and sings to me ; but there's an unsteadiness in her upper notes that I don't at all like ; and, in short, if you can't bring her round, I must really take her up to London and get her brought round by somebody there."

The surgeon did his best, and Marcia obeyed him as meekly as a child. He told Miss Denison that her father had expressed considerable uneasiness about her altered looks, and this influenced her. She felt a faint thrill of pleasure in the thought that her father cared for her a little ; perhaps, after all, just enough to make him uneasy when she was ill, and anxious that she should recover. After this little interview with the surgeon she made a sublime effort, and thrust her grief as much aside as any deathless sorrow can be thrust by a

constant mourner. She had no hope that her burden would ever be less. Her only prayer was, that she might daily learn to bear it better, and that the life which was valueless to herself might be of use to other people.

And so her life resumed its old course. She spent her lonely mornings in her own room—sometimes at her piano, sometimes with her books, still oftener at her easel; and Art, the divine consoler, lightened the burden of her desolate hours and deadened the sting of her grief. In the afternoons she went on her old rounds amongst her poor, with Dorothy and a Mount-Saint-Bernard dog for her companions; and it was in these afternoon walks that she most sharply felt the loss of her only friend. She passed the Hermitage now and then, and looked sadly at the closed casements. Dorothy's grandmother still kept watch and ward in the lonely cottage; for by a strange caprice Sir Jasper's tenant had not abandoned his tenancy, but had engaged himself to send the Baronet's agent a half-yearly cheque for the rent.

"Which proves that he intends to come back sooner or later," said the Baronet.

But Marcia, pondering on this fact, fancied it was just possible that Godfrey Pierrepont had some tender reverence for the place in which he had known and loved her, and wished to keep his hearth sacred from the presence of strangers.

"If I were wandering far away in savage places, it would please me to think there was one spot kept empty for my coming back, even if I knew in my heart that I never could go back to occupy it," she thought sadly.

And out of her fancy there arose a pale vision of the future; and she saw Godfrey Pierrepont coming back, after many years, old and grey and tired, to sit by the old hearth, and to look from the old casement at trees that had been under-wood when he first looked out upon them. And he would come to the Abbey with the thought of seeing her, and would hear perhaps that she had been lying for years in the vault under Scarsdale chancel. Or she might live to be old and grey herself, and would meet him perhaps some day in the glade, where they had fled together from the storm; meet him so changed a creature that the passionate sorrow of to-day would seem a thing to talk of with an incredulous smile.

"Do our souls really die before we do?" she thought wonderingly. "It must be so sad to outlive oneself."

Sir Jasper was very much inclined to resent his tenant's departure, and quoted Voltaire and Diderot to an alarming extent upon the subject.

"I like the man and the man's society, and I consider it a very churlish act on the man's part to turn his back upon me.

'Virtue,' Diderot remarks, 'under whatever phase we contemplate it, is a sacrifice of self;' and, upon my word, Marcia, I consider Pauncefort a very selfish fellow."

For some time the Baronet bewailed his friend. He was more than usually polite to his daughter; he was cordial; he was affectionate even: but every evening Marcia became more aware that there was something wanting to her father's complete satisfaction. He grew tired of *ecarté*; he yawned drearily in the midst of the most exquisite passages Beethoven ever wrote; he trifled discontentedly with the leaves of his *Saturday*; he quarrelled with the opinions of his *Times*; quoted Voltaire to the effect that modern writers are only contortionists; he recited the most peevish sentences in *Hamlet*; and found fault with the colouring of his favourite Etty.

Miss Denison was unselfishly anxious for her father's comfort, and watched him closely; but she could imagine neither a reason nor a remedy for his discontent. One day, however, the enigma was suddenly solved by the Baronet himself.

"Thank you, my love" he murmured drowsily, as Marcia played the last bar of a sonata; "very sweet indeed. You manage those cinquepated passages remarkably well; but I don't think your general time was quite as smooth as I have heard it. You miss some one to play duets with you. Suppose we ask the widow to come back to us for a week or two? We're under a kind of engagement to have her back, you know; and the sooner we get it over and have done with it, the better."

Sir Jasper cleared his throat with a little rasping cough, and peered furtively above the edge of his *Times* in a timid survey of his daughter's face.

She did not receive his proposition at all rapturously.

"Do you really want to have Mrs. Harding back, papa?" she asked wonderingly.

"I want her back, my dear Marcia! What can I want with a florid widow?" cried the Baronet. "But we asked her for the autumn; and having done so, of course we're in for it. *Noblesse oblige*, you know, my love; and so on. A florid widow for the autumn may be a nuisance; but having invited her, you're bound to have her."

"The autumn, papa!" exclaimed Marcia. "You said a week or two just now."

"Unquestionably, my dear, and I mean a week or two; but the autumn is a more gentlemanly way of putting it. You can't serve out your hospitality by the week, as if it were rations. You'd better write to Mrs. Harding to-morrow, and tell her that autumn is close at hand, and we are looking out for her promised visit."

"Do you think there is any necessity to write, papa? Depend upon it, if Mrs. Harding wishes to come back, she'll propose coming of her own accord, as she did before."

"And then we have all the worry of receiving her without the credit of inviting her! My dear Marcia, you have not the faintest idea of diplomacy."

Miss Denison was silent for some minutes, during which Sir Jasper still watched her across the upper edge of his newspaper, and then she said gravely:

"Papa, the honest truth is, that I don't like Mrs. Harding."

"My love, did I ever ask you to like her? I only ask you to perform your part of the engagement you made with her."

"I made, papa! It was you who asked her to come back, not I."

"Indeed!" exclaimed the Baronet innocently. "I asked her, did I? I suppose I found myself pushed into a kind of conversational corner, and was obliged to say something civil."

Marcia grew very thoughtful. A light was beginning to dawn faintly upon her mind; a light that showed her something very unpleasant—the image of her father beguiled and entrapped by a false and mercenary adventuress.

"Papa," she said, after a brief silence, "I don't think Mrs. Harding is a good woman."

"No more do I, my love," Sir Jasper answered promptly. "I don't presume to form any opinion upon the subject. How should I? I've never yet been able to come to any decision about Mary Stuart, and I know a great deal more about her than ever I shall know of Mrs. Harding. How difficult it is to have a decided opinion about anybody! There have been people who have called Queen Elizabeth 'a sad dog'; there are people who swear by her cousin as a persecuted divinity. All the light thrown upon the subject by contending historians is not strong enough to reveal it to every one in the same colours. How do I know whether Mrs. Harding is 'good' or 'bad'? I know that her gowns are made by a Frenchwoman, and that she is past mistress in the science of putting on a tight glove. I know that her voice is harmonious, and her presence agreeable to the eye; that she neither drops her *h's*, nor bangs my doors. For the rest, I neither know nor seek to know anything. What can be the good of discussing the moral attributes of an acquaintance, when you live in a world which would not allow you to know a John Howard or a Captain Coram if he eat peas with his knife?"

There were few subjects which Marcia had ever disputed with her father; but she knew him well enough to know the

utter uselessness of any discussion when his own pleasure was involved in the argument.

"If you tell me to write to Mrs. Harding, I shall obey you, papa," she said with a half-suppressed sigh; "but her visit will give me anything but pleasure; and I should be very glad if you had opened your doors to worthier acquaintance. The old county people——"

"The old county people would come to me in state, and bore me out of my life," answered the Baronet testily. "What have I in common with the old county families? I don't hunt; and in the finest run that your hunting fellows ever bragged of, my sympathies would be with the fox rather than the whooping idiots who expend such an unnecessary amount of perspiration in pursuing him. I am neither horsey nor doggy; I am neither agricultural nor philanthropic. I should scarcely know the difference between a short-legged Galway hunter and the purest Arab that ever bounded free from his native plains. I know no more of ploughing by machinery or sub-soil drainage than an Icelandier. I know nothing about the dwellings of the working classes; except that, as they don't interest themselves about my dwelling, and wouldn't drive a nail into a window-sash, or sweep away a handful of shavings for me without being paid for their trouble, they can scarcely expect me to interest myself in their comfort without being paid for my trouble. So you see, Marcia, the county families and I could only bore one another; and you can't give a whole houseful of people to understand that they're a collective nuisance without running some risk of offending them. With Mrs. Harding, on the contrary, I am safe. The woman knows how to make herself agreeable; and what is better still, she knows when she is making herself agreeable, and when she isn't. There is no creature so fascinating as the woman who knows when she's a nuisance. So I think, my dear, you had better write to the widow to-morrow morning, as you proposed," concluded Sir Jasper, artfully ducking behind his *Times*, and avoiding any encounter of glances with his daughter.

Marcia wrote the obnoxious letter as uncomplainingly as if she had been a child; but it was very coldly worded. "Papa wished me to remind you that you proposed paying us a visit in the autumn"—"Papa will be very glad to see you, if your plans will allow of your coming to us;" and so on ran the letter. There was no word of friendship from Marcia herself, no hint that her own pleasure would be enhanced by the lady's visit. Miss Denison could not forget that the widow had traduced Godfrey Pierrepont, and she could not forgive the vague slander. Now that she was familiar with the history of his life,

she wondered how and when this woman had known him. The record of his youth was the record of a life spent in seclusion. In all the story there was no mention of friends or even acquaintance. How could Mrs. Harding have encountered the hard-working literary hack whose days had been spent in the solitude of his chambers? Marcia concluded that the widow's acquaintance with Mr. Pierrepont could only have arisen through his sister-in-law, Leonora Fane, and that she had been amongst Mrs. Fane's visitors at the Camberwell cottage. As Mrs. Fane's friend, it was very likely that Mrs. Harding might have heard Godfrey Pierrepont vilified and traduced, since the only possible defence of the wife must involve the blackening of the husband's character. But how could this explanation account for the widow's apparent agitation when she had recognised Godfrey? This question perplexed Miss Denison; but then she suspected that it was very possible she had been mistaken as to Mrs. Harding's manner.

It was towards the end of August that Miss Denison wrote to the Circe who had contrived to make her society necessary to Sir Jasper; and in less than a week she received the widow's answer, which was to the effect that Mrs. Harding *had* made other plans for the autumn; but since dear Sir Jasper was good enough to remind her of her half-implied promise to return, and since there was no house in which she was so happy as in the dear old Abbey, and no society so intellectual and improving as dear Sir Jasper's, she would forego all other engagements and follow the dictates of her own inclination, which prompted her to come back to Scarsdale.

Marcia sighed as she handed her father the widow's epistle.

"Don't you see that it's a false letter, papa?" she said, almost impatiently; "made up of conventional sentences, as artificial and meaningless as if it were copied out of a Complete Letter-writer."

"Of course it is, my dear," the Baronet answered with perfect good-humour. "Mrs. Harding is conventional; Mrs. Harding is artificial. Do you think if she were not that I would allow you to invite her here? If she were original I would have nothing to do with her; for originality is only a milder name for eccentricity. I suppose Pauncefort sets up for originality; and look at his conduct. What can be more disgustingly selfish than his rushing away at the very time I most required his society? Don't bury yourself in that Crome when I'm speaking to you, pray Marcia; it's a charming little bit, I know, but you can bury yourself in it on a more fitting occasion. I was about to remark that conventionality is a

very desirable quality in an acquaintance ; and Mrs. Harding's letter is extremely nice—six 'dear Sir Jaspers' on the two pages. But I suppose your candid person would have called me 'that brute Sir Jasper ;' or 'your preposterous old father ;' or 'the governor ;' or 'the middle-aged party ;' or something equally abusive."



CHAPTER XXIII.

TWOPENNY POSTMAN.

It is not to be supposed that Mr. Dobb and his circle confined their social intercourse entirely to the Sunday evening reunions at the house of the brewer's-clerk. There were grand occasions on which Henry Adolphus and his associates enjoyed themselves in a more elaborate manner ; and on such occasions Selina would generally invite her rustie cousin to join in the festivities. For when you are about to regale your friends, a farm-bailiff's daughter, who can bring you a hamper of eggs and poultry, fruit and vegetables, home-cured bacon, and odorous virgin honey, is not a person to be disregarded.

There was very brilliant weather during the last weeks of August ; and inspired by the breath of balmy breezes that blew into the windows of Amanda Villas, only a little tainted by the sulphurous vapours of a neighbouring brick-field, Mr. Dobb set himself to work to organise a pienie.

The idea was discussed on the first Sunday evening after it had sprung, complete as Minerva, from the lively Dobb's brain.

"Suppose we fix on the first. The bloated aristocrat will be marking the harmless partridge with his cruel eye, and why should not we also have our little game?" exclaimed Henry Adolphus. "Spinner, my boy, just take your pencil and jot down a few figures. We'll do the thing in slap-up style, or we'll leave it undone. First and foremost, where shall we go?"

Of course every body suggested a different place, and pooh-poohed his neighbour's suggestion. But the brewer's-clerk was the despot of his small circle ; and after allowing his guests to contradict one another until the argumentative was verging upon the quarrelsome, Mr. Dobb arose, in all the

majesty of the master-spirit, and spread the oil of conciliation upon the troubled waters of contention.

"Don't cut one another's throats just yet," he exclaimed; "if you don't respect the laws of your country you may as well have mercy on my wife's Kidderminster. I'll tell you what it is, we will not go to Mildale Abbey, Spinner, for if we do we shall make Pocombe savage; and we won't go to Bray Common, Pocombe, for fear of infuriating Spinner; and if we were to choose Waldon Woods, as Smith proposes, we should bring down upon our heads the wrath of Sanders, who votes for Turlington Meads. Our motto shall be *Pax vobiscum*. We won't aggravate any body by obliging any body else. We'll go to the Lemley Hills, which not one of you duffers has had the good taste to remember, and which is the finest picnic place in the county, and five hundred feet above the level of the dome of St. Paul's."

"Oh Selina," whispered Dorothy, who was sitting near her cousin, "do you think Henry Adolphus will let me go?"

Mr. Dobb's sharp ear caught the whisper.

"There's my Cousin Dorothy bribing my wife to give her an invitation," said the clerk. "No, Dorothy; not six pair of fowls, as you generously propose to contribute; we'll say a couple of couple of fowls, and a ditto ditto of ducks, and any small trifle in the way of a twenty-pound ham, or a round of corned beef, that you may wish to throw in."

"I'm sure father would let me bring a hamper," gasped Dorothy, looking at Mr. Catheron, who sat by her side pulling fiercely at a big cigar, and who evinced very little interest in the picnic proposition. "You'll go, won't you, Gervoise?" she whispered. "I don't care a bit about going, unless you are to be there."

"Dorothy!" cried Mr. Dobb sternly, "this is *not* leap-year; and matrimonial proposals emanating from the fair sex are as unwarrantable as they are uncalled for. Besides which, whispering is not permitted in polite society. However, your youth and ignorance shall plead your excuse, and you may consider yourself forgiven."

After this Mr. Dobb and his friends went into some very elaborate calculations of ways and means: how Mr. Spinner was to bring his wife and sister and a gigantic veal-and-ham pie; Mr. Smith, his niece and two bottles of the best Old Tom from the Castleford Arms; Mr. Pocombe was to be accompanied by Mrs. Pocombe and a cold saddle of mutton; Mr. Sanders, being a bachelor, was taxed lightly, to the extent of a bottle of sherry and a plum-cake, to be bought at the pastry-cook's.

"And no black-beetles in it, if you please!" Mr. Dobb in-

terjected earnestly. "It is not generally known that the rich appearance of wedding-cakes is produced by black-beetles and London porter; but it is a melancholy fact, nevertheless. So please be careful, Sanders; we won't say anything about bad eggs or rancid butter, for those of course are used by all confectioners."

Mr. Dobb himself proposed to contribute what he called sundries, and which seemed to consist chiefly of such inexpensive elements of the feast as salt, pepper, mustard, and pickles; but which the dictatorial Dobb declared "would cost a precious sight more than any body would imagine."

"And what will you bring, my honourable friend in the most popular branch of the two services?" asked the brewer's-clerk, turning suddenly to Gervoise Catheron, whose dark brows contracted gloomily as he sat puffing slowly at his cigar, with his head bent and his face in shadow. "Come, you're the heaviest swell amongst us, and you ought to come out strong. What are you going to stand for the common-weal?—Mind your pie isn't common weal, by the way, Spinner."

"I don't know that I shall be able to go to your confounded picnic," answered the sub-lieutenant sulkily. "In the first place, I detest all picnics; and in the second place, I may be on duty."

"And in the third place, you don't care about the expense," returned Mr. Dobb with a sneer. Who talks of the extravagant habits of the army and navy? Here's a gentleman who has so great a respect for the image of his sovereign that he shirks his friends for the sake of saving half-a-dozen impressions of her 'picture in little.'"

"Oh, confound your picnic!" cried the lieutenant. "If it's my contribution you want, you're welcome to it whether I go or stay away. I suppose a sovereign will shut up your insolence—eh, Dobb?"

"I suppose it will," answered that gentleman, "when I get it."

These last four words were pronounced with *intention*. Gervoise Catheron felt in his pockets, and the frown upon his handsome dissolute face grew darker than before. He had trusted in Mr. Dobb's indignant repudiation of his offer, and found himself in an unpleasant position, exposed to all the insolence that can be expressed by half-a-dozen pairs of under-bred eyes and half-a-dozen under-bred tongues.

When the descendant of a good old family keeps low company he generally has to pay very dearly for his predilection. Oh, most fatal of all vices that can lead a man to his ruin! the bane of a Brauwer and a Morland, the destruction of a

Savage and a Burns ! Unhappy is the hour in which ambitious youth first exclaims that it is better to reign in a village than to serve in Rome.

While the lieutenant's frown deepened and the grin upon the half-dozen vulgar faces grew broader, a little hand crept stealthily into Gervoise Catheron's palm,—a tender little hand, soft and gentle as the fluttering of a pigeon's wing,—and the lieutenant felt the pressure of a coin—a coin which he grasped as eagerly as the traditional drowning man may have grasped the traditional straw,—and in whose touch and weight he recognised a sovereign. Dorothy had been groping in her pocket for the purse in which she kept one glittering golden piece, very much on the same principle as that on which the Miss Prinroses kept their wealth ; and she was ineffably happy in being able to relieve her lover's embarrassment.

Mr. Catheron flung down the sovereign with such an impetus that it spun upon the table with a loud ringing noise before it settled in the very centre of the hospitable board and under the shadow of the mighty can that contained the customary gallon.

"Corn in Egypt !" cried Mr. Spinner, a little disappointed by the unlooked-for *dénouement*.

"And a good one," said Mr. Dobb.

"I'm sure the lieutenant couldn't have acted more liberal," added the pacific Selina, who, in her own words, was always anxious to make things pleasant.

"And now I'll wish you good-evening, gentlemen," said Mr. Catheron, throwing the end of his cigar across Mr. Spinner's sandy head in its way to the open window, and kicking over the chair from which he had risen as he walked to the door. "I've paid my share towards your very hospitable entertainment, and you and your picnic may be —— !"

"Come, I say," exclaimed Dobb, pocketing the sovereign. 'this won't do, you know, Catheron. A lark is a lark, you know ; and a man who can't stand a little good-natured chaff had better turn hermit at once and shut himself for ever from his fellow-man. Sit down, can't you, old fellow, and have another weed?—Here, Spinner, give the lieutenant one of those regalias of yours ; never mind if they're sixpence each, we'll subscribe a penny all round and pay you for it," added the clerk, in whose circle playful allusions to the state of a man's finances or his unwillingness to part with his money were considered immensely amusing.

The lieutenant complied sulkily, and resumed his seat sulkily, and accepted Mr. Spinner's cigar as ungraciously as he accepted every other civility that evening. Dorothy looked

at him with hopeless, despairing eyes. She had a dim idea that he was a worthless creature, and that only misery and disappointment could come of her love for him; and yet the most transient look from his dark haggard eyes, the faintest touch of his weak womanish hand, moved her with a thrill of emotion that was more like pain than joy, in its intensity.

Mr. Catheron had of late submitted to a good deal of that elephantine badinage which Mr. Dobb called chaff, but which less facetiously-disposed people might have considered vulgar insolence. "Heavy swell" though the lieutenant might be in the estimation of the Dobb circle, he was fain to play second fiddle, and to give way upon most points to the brewer's-clerk. Sooth to say, Gervoise Catheron was in the clerk's power, bound to him by the most ignoble bondage that can make one man the slave of another. He owed Mr. Dobb money. The system which had begun with the borrowing of "a little silver," or half-a-sovereign, had gone on for the last six months, and by this time Gervoise Catheron owed the brewer's-clerk upwards of thirty pounds. Now the value of money is purely relative; and thirty pounds—which might seem the merest bagatelle to a man who paid income-tax for two or three thousand per annum—is a large sum when subtracted from the funds of an individual who has only a hundred and twenty pounds a-year for board, washing, lodging, and clothing, *menus plaisirs* and servant's wages. The thirty pounds had constituted the balance of a little fund which Henry Adolphus had hoarded in his bachelor-days, and the greater part of which had been expended on the furnishing of the newly-built dovecot to which he had brought his Selina. The thirty pounds had constituted the nucleus of a future fortune; and Mrs. Dobb fondly believed that it still stood to her husband's credit in the Roxborough Savings-bank. Supreme as the facetious Dobb might be among his companions, and meekly as his wife's white eyelashes drooped under his noble gaze, there were matters which he did not care to reveal to that amiable partner; and this little affair of the thirty pounds was one of them.

"I should have to stand no end of nagging if I told her," soliloquised Mr. Dobb: "and nagging won't get the money back from Catheron."

It is not to be supposed that a gentleman of Mr. Dobb's business capacity would have been so weak as to lend his friend money without a view to ultimate profit. The clerk's advances were only so many investments of capital—investments that promised to bring in very handsome interest. The precept laid down by the warrior Duke of Wellington with regard to good interest and bad security, although as nearly

infallible as human wisdom can be, is apt to be overlooked by the sanguine capitalist, in whom nature has implanted the genius of the speculator. For every five pounds which Mr. Dobb had advanced to the lieutenant, he held that gentleman's I O U for ten. No Catheron ever stopped to count the cost of any personal gratification ; and Gervoise was as willing to promise a hundred per cent. as he would have been to promise five for the accommodation he required. When a man has a shrewd suspicion that his I O U is only worth the half-sheet of paper on which it is written, he is apt to be very indifferent as to the sum for which he writes himself down a debtor.

Gervoise Catheron met all his friend's remonstrances with the assurance that the money should be paid, principal and interest, every sixpence. The lieutenant had been a gambler in a small way ever since he had been old enough to read the sporting intelligence in his father's papers, and to go shares in the half-crown which a neighbouring butcher's boy ventured on the Derby favourite. He had loitered at the corner of Farringdon Street, and hung about the purlieus of Leather Lane, and lounged against posts, and besotted himself with beer in the dusky parlours of sporting publices in Newgate Market, in the intervals of freedom which his profession had afforded him ; and even now, when his regiment was stationed at Castleford, he went up to London whenever he could get a day's leave, and went sneaking back to his old haunts, to meet the same seedy conspirators at the same street-corners, and to hold stealthy consultations in the same undertones, and with the same air of plotting an assassination or so.

Again and again he assured Mr. Dobb that the flimsy little I O U's, scrawled so carelessly in the weak illegible hand, should be faithfully redeemed. Henry Adolphus knew all his schemes ; his secret intelligence about the outsider that was to win the Two Thousand, and didn't ; his equally reliable information respecting the dark horse from Yorkshire, which had been artfully reported lame, but which was known by the deep ones to be a flyer, and was a safe winner for the Chester Cup. As the scent of blood to the beast of prey, so is the slang of the turf to weak mankind. The love of horse-racing seems to be innate in the human breast. There is no fascination so irresistible as the atmosphere of the betting-ring ; no intoxication so overpowering as the excitement of the race-course ; and no subtle amalgamation of southern blossoms that Mr. Rimmel can devise will ever be as popular as the simple perfume which he calls Jockey Club.

Henry Adolphus, trembling for his thirty pounds, was yet weak enough to heed the voice of the charmer, and to believe again and again in the reliable information, which

always resulted in discomfiture. The two men studied Holt's betting-list until the flimsy paper on which the price-current of the ring was printed grew soft and flabby with much folding and unfolding. They discussed the prospects of the racing-season until poor Selina's shallow brain grew confused with their stable-jargon; but the more they talked the deeper sank the feet of the brewer's clerk into that fatal quagmire which men call the turf. - There were times when, instead of regretting his folly in having lent money to Catheron, Mr. Dobb bewailed his inability to speculate on his own account, so brilliant seemed the opportunity for speculation, so certain appeared the prospect of success. The better part of the racing-year had gone by; hope and despair had reigned alternately in Gervoise Catheron's breast. The Two Thousand and the One Thousand, the Metropolitan, the Derby, the Oaks, the Ascot Stakes and Cup, the Liverpool Plate, the Chester Cup, the Great Ebor,—all the grand spring and summer races had gone by; and Gervoise Catheron, backing outsiders with the desperate tenacity of a man who wants to win a large stake with the smallest capital, had lost his pitiful ventures one after another, borrowing wherever he could borrow, and pawning whatever he had to pawn, until at last the great autumnal contest was near at hand, and the sporting universe began to talk about The Leger, the grand encounter of the year—the battle-ground where Greek meets Greek, and comes the tug of war which is perhaps to win the blue ribbon of the North for the victor of Epsom Downs or the conqueror of Newmarket.

The end of August was fast approaching, and from the end of August to the fifteenth of September was an interval only too brief for action; but as yet the lieutenant had not been able to raise a sixpence for a venture which he declared and believed might redeem the fortunes of the year. He knew the state of his friend Dobb's finances well enough to know that any appeal in that quarter would be fruitless. He had borrowed of his brother officers, and had sunk to the lowest depths of that degradation into which the habitual borrower, who never repays, must ultimately go down. He was in debt to all the tradesmen with whom he had any dealings, for small loans of money as well as for goods. Even poor little Dorothy's savings had not been sacred for him; and the sovereign produced for the picnic had been the last of a little hoard contained in a pasteboard Swiss cottage, which the faithful little maid had ruthlessly broken into for her lover's benefit. And in the only sporting-circle to which Mr. Catheron had access there was no such thing as credit. The book-men with whom he had dealings sat in dingy parlours, with

canvas-bags before them, and received the golden tribute of their votaries as fast as they could count the coins handed in to them.

The lieutenant grew moodier and moodier as the days went by, and no glimmer from the pole-star of hope lighted the dull horizon. And this time his information was so certain—this time there could be no chance of disappointment. The knowing ones were all agreed for once in a way; and the voices of Farringdon Street and Newgate Market were as the voice of one man.

"If I had a million of money, I'd put every stiver of it on Twopenny Postman; and as much more as I could beg or borrow into the bargain. If anybody would lay me a pony against my grandmother, I'd put her on, and not be afraid of the old lady coming to grief," had been heard to exclaim a gentleman of the blue-apron profession, who was the oracle of his circle, and whose lightest word was absorbed by eager listeners, and fondly dwelt upon in future converse. A fortune was to be made by Twopenny Postman, said the lieutenant's advisers; if a man only had a ten-pound note or so wherewith to venture. But Gervoise Catheron had neither "tenner" nor "fiver," as he said plaintively to his friend Dobb; and the chance would be lost.

The two men talked the affair over as they walked back to Castleford in the starlight that autumn evening, after escorting little Dorothy to the gates of Scarsdale.

"There never was such a chance," said Mr. Catheron. "The horse has been kept out of the way all this season; and as he never did much when he was a two-year-old, the public ain't sweet upon him. But I think they ought to have had a sickener of your crack two-years-olds by this time, after the way they burnt their fingers with Prometheus for the Two Thousand; he beat everything that was out on the T. Y. C. last year, and shut up like a telescope in the great race. Your crack two-years-olds are like your Infant Roseuses and your precocious children whose names are Norval at three years old, and who don't know B from a bull's foot at twenty. Twopenny Postman is a great ugly raw-boned animal with a stride from here to yonder; and he hasn't been kept out of the way for nothing. Those who saw him run on the Curragh say his rush at the finish was just as if he had been shot out of a gun. He's a Yorkshire horse, and he's entered under the name of Smithson; but there's three men interested in him. They know all about him in Hull. There's a publican, called Howden, has got a third share in him; and I know something of Howden. He's a deep one, is Howden. He and his chums have been backing the horse on the quiet ever since the spring-

You could have had any odds a month or two ago ; the swells are all on Lord Edinbro and Mr. Cheerful ; and Twopenny Postman hasn't been inquired for any where till very lately. But he's been creeping up in the Manchester betting ; they know what's what at Manchester, and you won't get more than fifteen to one ; but even at that your 'tenner' will bring you in a hundred and fifty, and that's not bad interest for your money."

Mr. Dobb's mouth watered as the mouth of an epicure who hears the eloquent description of some impossible banquet. If the lieutenant had been able to back Twopenny Postman and had won a hundred and fifty, the I O U's which now seemed such miserable scraps of wastepaper might be converted into crisp bank-notes. Ah, then, what triumph to go to Selina and say, "Behold the fruits of a prudent investment!" and he would be able to give her a new bonnet, and to treat himself to gorgeous velvet raiment, such as he had beheld with envy on the stalwart backs of the military dandies lounging in the Castleford High Street ; and after doing this, he might still put fifty pounds in the bank in place of the abstracted thirty.

But then he had trusted in the voice of the lieutenant before to-day. How about the other outsiders in which Mr. Catheron had so confidently believed ? How about Hydrophobia and Rhadamanthus, Mixed Biscuits, Newgate Calendar, and Alcibiades ? all of whom had been represented to him as infallible—all of whom had suffered ignominious defeat. Common-sense whispered to the brewer's-clerk that Gervoise Catheron's information was a delusion and a snare ; but the demon of speculation possessed himself of Mr. Dobb's other ear, and reminded him that a man cannot go on losing for ever, and that a speculator who has made half-a-dozen unlucky strokes is very likely to make a great *coup* on the seventh venture. Nor was Mr. Catheron himself slow to make use of this argument.

"Suppose Sir Josiah Morley had left off betting when he lost twenty thou. upon Skeleton," said the lieutenant, "where would he be now ? Suppose Mr. Cheerful had given up training after the defeat of Gutta-Percha, the colt he gave two thousand five hundred for as a yearling ? The secret of success on the turf is persistence ; and the man who goes on long enough is sure to make a fortune. I know we've been deuced unlucky all the summer ; but the tip I've got this time comes from a new quarter, and I know it's a safe quarter. However, say no more about it. I've got no money, and you can't lend me any, or get any body else to lend me any ; so that settles the question."

But the question was by no means to be set at rest thus

easily. The image of the ugly raw-boned horse haunted Mr. Dobb in the dead of the night, and his rest was broken by the visions of financial triumphs that might have been his if he had possessed a ten-pound note. Five pounds advanced to Catheron would have recompensed that gentleman for his information, and would have brought him in seventy-five pounds, out of which Henry Adolphus would have claimed sixty. With the other five the clerk could have speculated on his own account, and would have stood to win another seventy-five; and by this means the sixteenth of September would have beheld him possessed of a hundred and thirty-five pounds—the nucleus of a colossal fortune. Had Lafitte as much with which to begin his mighty career? Tumbling his long greasy hair feverishly upon what seemed a peculiarly lumpy pillow, Mr. Dobb beheld himself in a brilliant future; doing little bills for the Castleford officers at thirty per cent., and renewing them for another fifteen. Nor was the range of his mind's eye limited to this glowing vision: far away in the immeasurable distance of dreamland, he saw the image of a man leaning against a pillar of the Stock Exchange, while his fellow men gazed reverently on his rhadamanthine countenance as if they would therefrom divine the secrets of empires—and the name of that man was Dobb.

The clerk went to his office, looking pale and flabby of aspect, the next morning; and writing to a customer on business connected with the brewery, he found himself beginning:

"We take the Twopenny Postman to inform you that our X, XX, and XXX of last March are now," &c. &c.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE GATHERING OF THE DOBBITES.

HAVING pledged himself to the carrying out of the entertainment which he had himself originated, Mr. Dobb was not the man to draw back, however distracted he might be by other interests. As prime mover of the picnic on Lemley Hills, Mr. Dobb's honour was involved in the success of the entertainment; so between the twenty-fifth of August and the first of September he had very little time to think of Twopenny Postman. The day came in due course, and was exactly the kind of day that all picnicers would demand of Providence, if they

dared beseech so temporal a boon—a regular blazer ; a day on which the leaves seem to crackle and blister, and the brown turf on the hill-side has an odour of hay ; a day on which the cloudless blue sky makes you wink as you look heavenward ; a day on which pleasure-seekers who issue forth blonde and delicate of aspect go home at night with the complexions of Red Indians. The picnickers assembling in Mrs. Dobb's small sitting-room congratulated one another on the weather, and wore off the ceremonial edges of intercourse by that means.

No social gathering could have been inaugurated with greater ceremony. Mrs. Dobb, who was nothing unless she was intensely polite, had enough to do in making ceremonial presentations. There was Mr. Spinner's sister, who had to be introduced to Mrs. Pocombe ; and there was Mr. Smith's mother—a mysterious old woman in a poke bonnet—who had not been invited, and who had to be introduced to every body. There were more new bonnets and more dazzling garments of every description than had been seen collected together on the pavement before Amanda Villas within the memory of the inhabitants ; and confidential murmurs of “fifteen and nine,” “seventeen and sixpence, my dear, and reduced from seven-and-twenty on account of the lateness of the season,” might have been heard among the ladies ; while even the men congratulated one another facetiously on their splendour of appearance.

“An early rise in the current price of starch may be safely prophesied by any one who beholds Spinner's waistcoat. I saw that buff doeskins were looking lively, and I can understand the reason, now I contemplate my noble Pocombe's legs. Never mind the creases in that blue frock of yours, Sanders ; that young man at Cawly's does *not* know how to fold a coat. I had mine ironed when I took it out last Saturday night ; but do not blush, my Sanders ; there is no shame in honest poverty.” Thus, in the abandon of his gaiety, said Mr. Dobb, as he stood among his Lares and Penates, with a decanter in one hand and a glass in the other. The decanter contained a cordial composed of gin, sugar, and orange-peel ; which compound Henry Adolphus declared was almost as good as curaçoa ; but then “almost” is a very wide word.

An omnibus had been hired for the conveyance of the party, and that vehicle overshadowed Mr. Dobb's mansion, while the clerk regaled his friends in the parlour. To the denizens of Amanda Villas, stationed at windows and lounging on door-steps, an omnibus might have been the newest and rarest object in creation, so fondly did they gaze on the

vehicle, on which "Railway Station," "Roxborough Arms," "Castleford," "King's Head," were inscribed in gilded capitals. But although an omnibus devoted to the public service may be the most commonplace of conveyances, there is something almost awful in the idea of an omnibus withdrawn from its common uses and placed at the disposal of an individual. To have the destiny of an omnibus in one's own hands; to be able to order that mighty vehicle to the right or the left; to take it up narrow lanes and ignominious turnings; to keep it standing unconscionable periods before one's own door, is to feel a sense of power that is not without its intoxicating influence. It is to feel, in a minor degree, the triumphant thrill that must have stirred the veins of Joshua at Ajalon; it is to enjoy the sense of masterdom that makes a Robespierre drunken with blood, when he finds the axe of the national guillotine a plaything for his cruel hand.

Henry Adolphus was not proof against the intoxication of the omnibus. He looked at it with a fond admiring gaze, and discovered points of beauty which he had never found in that class of vehicle until now. And then there was the delight of packing the comestibles; the hampers which had to be "humoured," as the driver of the noble vehicle said; the brown bottles that had to be "offered" to all sorts of niches and corners, and were generally refused as too long or too wide. Surely so many gallon-measures of beer, so many hampers of provision, so many open baskets of green stuffs, were never stowed into the recesses of one omnibus since the invention of that vehicle. A savoury odour, as of roast-fowl and overdone veal-pie, pervaded the atmosphere of Amanda Villas; and the mouths of Mr. Dobb's neighbours watered as basket after basket was handed into the vehicle, amid the rather derisive cheers of the juvenile population gathered around the gate.

Dorothy arrived in the chaise-cart, driven by a hobbledehoy brother, and accompanied by two rosy-cheeked sisters; for so splendid had been the contributions from the home-farm, that Mr. Dobb had extended his invitations to the Tursgood family. And over and above all past contributions, Dorothy brought with her an offering which eclipsed all meaner gifts as the sun eclipses the stars. Miss Denison had been pleased to give her little maid pleasure on the occasion of this family festival, and had ordered the butler to pack a basket of wine—real wine, such as Sir Jasper drank with his own patrician lips, and which Sir Jasper's friends considered it a privilege to share. The butler had done the thing with that liberality which distinguishes human nature in the disposal of other people's property

Mr. Dobb could not resist the temptation of opening the basket ; while his friends watched his proceedings in rapt admiration. The basket contained wines which the Dobb circle had only read of in books. Hock, in a tall tapering bottle ; sparkling Moselle and Burgundy, in dainty envelopes of pink paper ; a tiny flask of Maraschino, encased in wicker-work ; a bottle of Madeira ; and a bottle of port that had been bottled before Miss Denison's birth. There were half-a-dozen bottles in all ; and Mr. Dobb, counting them as they stood in a dazzling little cluster on his table, wondered whether he was bound in honour to devote the entire number to his friends' delectation, or whether he might not fairly subtract a bottle or so for home consumption. But the eyes of his guests were upon him, and the hands of his guests were officiously active in putting the bottles back into the basket. Mr. Dobb watched their proceedings pensively, and began to think that he was rather a loser by this picnic.

A cruel disappointment awaited poor Dorothy in her cousin's little parlour. She was looking so bright and happy in her neat muslin gown and pretty straw hat shadowing the rosy modest face, and hiding the dancing light in the hazel eyes ; but her cherry-red under-lip fell like the lip of a child who is going to cry, when Mrs. Dobb gave her a little carelessly-folded, illegibly-written three-cornered note, which had been brought to Amanda Villas by a private in Gervoise Catheron's regiment early that morning.

"MY DEAREST DOLL," scrawled the lieutenant, "I have some confounded business on my hands that will keep me in Castleford till after the two-o'clock post, and sha'n't be able to join your party in time for the 'bus. If I can borrow any brute in the way of a horse, I'll ride over to the hills in time to have a chat with my pretty pet ; and in the mean time she must enjoy herself without the most miserable devil in existence, and her devoted
G. C."

The termination of the little note was not calculated to increase Dorothy's happiness ; but already she had discovered that to fondly love an unprincipled scamp is not quite the royal road to perfect peace and joy. She had begun to suffer all those vicarious tortures which it is woman's mission to endure. She was not yet Mrs. Catheron ; but she had already assumed that unequal share in a man's existence which it is the privilege of a wife to enjoy. She could no more have smoked one of the lieutenant's regalias than she could have drilled his men ; but the debt which Mr. Catheron owed his tobaccoist weighed more heavily on her mind than it did on h's

And surely it was she who owed so much money to the tailor, and she who lived in hourly dread of arrest, and she who was snubbed and ill-treated by her commanding officer, and she who had lost money on the turf. Gervoise told her all his troubles, and the sympathetic little heart made a new torture for itself out of his every anxiety.

It would have been a relief to her to have cried a little after the perusal of her lover's letter; but she was fain to gulp down her tears and to look forward as hopefully as she could to the chance of seeing Gervoise in the afternoon. Unhappily Mr. Catheron was not the best possible hand at keeping a promise; and poor Dorothy's heart sickened as she thought how the long sunshiny day might drag itself out above all these noisy people without any blessed hour bringing her lover to her side, until the sun went down on her desolation. She was glad to get into the farthest corner of the omnibus; and sat silent and unnoticed, while the vehicle drove at a dashing pace through the little streets, where the new houses looked such flimsy boxes of brick-and-mortar—so much mortar and so little brick—and were all so bare and raw of aspect, like slack-baked half-quartern loaves. They dashed into the High Street presently, and then away along the straggling outskirts of the town, where Mr. Dobb, who acted as conductor, and suspended himself from a leathern strap in the most perilous attitude he could assume, had ample scope for the indulgence of his lively fancy. That the vivacious Dobb bawled "City," "Bank," "Charing Cross," &c., after the approved manner of the professional metropolitan conductor; that he plunged his head into the vehicle to ask if any gentleman would ride outside for the accommodation of a lady; that he bade his friends get their money ready, and informed them that "children must be paid for;" that he goaded small boys to madness by asking them benevolently if they would have a ride, and insulting them by derisive gestures when they showed an inclination to accept his kindly offers; that he bewildered the drivers of passing vehicles by telling them in confidence that the omnibus contained the patients of the county lunatic-asylum—that the light-whiskered man on the knife-board was dangerous, and the elderly lady in the black bonnet had murdered eleven small children with a gingham umbrella; that he scared the senses of homely-faced market-women by offering to take them to impossible places; that he drove sportsmen to distraction by pantomimic expressions of terror at sight of their guns, and by insulting suggestions as to the probability of their shooting their own boots; and that he did not hold his tongue for three consecutive minutes during the whole of the journey,—are facts that scarcely need any record. Given a

facetious individual of the Dobb species, and poor indeed must be that imagination which will not enable its owner to prophesy the manner in which he will conduct himself on any particular occasion.

Nor was the brewer's-clerk in the least degree exhausted by the exertions of the journey. His agreeable spirits did not abandon him once during that long blazing September day. Pleasure-seekers who enjoyed themselves upon the Lemley Hills were subject to that penalty which belongs to all elevated regions,—the obligation to stare wildly into space in search of such objects as the dome of St. Paul's, the towers of Canterbury Cathedral, the Monument, Windsor Castle, Beechy Head, and other celebrated points of sight. No sooner had Mr. Dobb's party alighted from the vehicle than this species of torture began. Officious young men produced pocket-telescopes, which upon application to the normal eye only increased the mistiness of the atmosphere, but by aid of which the possessors of the instruments pretended to distinguish the more salient features of five counties. Then commenced those differences of opinion that always arise upon these occasions. The dark splotch on the horizon which Mr. Spinner pointed out as Windsor Castle, Mr. Pocombe declared to be Canterbury Cathedral; the spiky appearance which according to Mr. Sanders indicated the Needles, Mr. Smith positively affirmed was neither more nor less than the steeple of Langham Church; and then the vivacious Dobb availed himself of the opening presented to his genius, and pointed out the Rock of Gibraltar, Mount Vesuvius in full play, the topmost range of the Himalayas, the Kremlin, and the Wellington statue at Hyde Park Corner; nor did he fail to describe the appearance of the Queen and the young Princesses, at that moment promenading on the slopes at Windsor, and distinctly to be beheld by the naked eye; and standing on tiptoe, and craning forward into space, Mr. Dobb declared that the savoury odours of the royal shoulder of mutton and onion sauce, then being prepared in the Castle kitchen, floated upward across the heather and the harebells, and inspired yearnings for the immediate opening of the baskets. After this the business of the day began—a hamper was opened, and the revellers had what they called a "snack;" but as it was a snack that involved the consumption of about a gallon of half-and-half, the voices and the spirits of the merry-makers rose considerably ere it was concluded. When the snack had been disposed of, the party broke up into little groups; and the chief amusement they found available seemed to consist in descending the steep hill-side for a few yards in a little nervous run, and then tumbling ignominiously and sliding to the

bottom, not without a good deal of bumping against sharp stones and scraping over thorny bushes ; after which ordeal there was all the delightful labour of scrambling up again over a slippery turf that afforded a very indifferent hold for the human foot encumbered by the boot of civilisation. Dorothy's brother and sisters and the younger members of the company found a little hazel copse at the foot of one of the hills, and enjoyed themselves noisily among the rustling bushes. Poor Dorothy herself took little pleasure in the vulgar riotous companionship, the bare sun-burnt hills, the plethora of good things to eat and drink. The castled crag of Drachenfels is a very dreary place without the "gentle hand" and the "dear eyes" of the one beloved companion, who carries an atmosphere of Paradise into the dullest regions. Of course the great business of the day was the dinner. Whatever rapture Mr. Dobb's party might affect as they gazed upon the romantic landscape, the hazy distances, the purple horizon, and all the changing effects of light and shade that dappled the pastoral valleys and played upon the distant heights, the eyes of the pleasure-seekers were apt to wander back to the spot where Mrs. Dobb and another matron sat on the grass keeping guard over the baskets. A profound sigh of satisfaction arose simultaneously from every breast when the lively Dobb gave the signal for opening the hampers. Then, and then only, the real excitement of the picnic began. Torn muslins, sunburnt faces, scratched hands, and bruised elbows, —all the penalties attendant on rustic enjoyment were forgotten in the all-absorbing task of preparation. Spinner developed so great a talent for the arrangements of a dinner-table, that he exposed himself to his vivacious friend's witticisms, and was declared to have begun life as a waiter in a cheap eating-house. Sanders showed himself a Hercules in the drawing of corks. Pocombe announced himself as gifted in the art of compounding a salad ; and exhibited his talent by chopping the lettuces into a vegetable mincemeat, and then plunging them into a cold bath of vinegar. But this primitive mixture, which would have set a Brillat Savarin's teeth on edge for life, was highly approved of by Mr. Dobb's party, who seemed to have an abnormal capacity for the consumption of vinegar.

It would be a waste of labour to carry your dinner five hundred feet above the dome of St. Paul's, unless you were sure of an improved appetite as a compensation for so much trouble. The Dobbites had no reason for complaint upon this score ; the feast was a triumphal progress—from fowl and hare to fowl and tongue, from veal pie to duck, from duck to beef and salad, from beef and salad to pastry, from pastry to

cheese, and from cheese to every thing of a choleric tendency in the way of fruit. Poor sentimental Dorothy blushed for her cousin's circle, and was almost glad her lover was not there to see what vulgar ravenous creatures her kindred owned for their friends.

Sir Jasper's wine had been reserved for the concluding splendour of the feast, and was duly handed round and discussed. Whether it was quite agreeable to the taste of the party may be a little doubtful. No one was bold enough to express an adverse opinion; and a party of connoisseurs dining at the Carlton could not have held their glasses up to the light, or inspected the little oily drops trickling on the transparent rim of the vessel, with a more critical aspect or a more orthodox air of deliberation. The mysterious old woman in the black bonnet brought discredit upon her kindred by remarking that the Maraschino was "the best gin-and-peppermint she ever remembered partaking of;" but what can you expect from a person who wears a poke bonnet, and who is darkly suspected of having received three-and-sixpence a week from the parish in one specially hard winter? "It's all very well to talk about your days being long in the land, and so forth," said Mr. Dobb when he discussed the day's proceedings in the bosom of his family, "but there's nothing in the Catechism about taking your mother to picnics, and I think Smith ought to have known better."

After the feast there was more tumbling down the hills and tearing of muslins; and by-and-by some one organised a circle forkiss-in-the-ring, which is a nice laborious game for a shadowless hill-top on a blazing afternoon; and the Dobbites grew livelier and louder as the sun sloped westward. To say that any one of the party had taken too much in the way of alcoholic stimulant would be to bring against them an accusation which with one indignant voice would have been repudiated; but there were few amongst the merry-makers who, looking for Windsor Castle in the distance, would not have been liable to be mystified by a vision of two towering keeps where only one should have appeared. There was a pleasant haziness in the minds of the Dobbites at this time in the afternoon, a dreamy indifference as to the future, a doubtful sensation with regard to the past, a shadowy idea that they had been enjoying themselves upon the Lemley Hills for a month or so, a vague uncertainty as to the day of the week and the time of year, and a benevolence of feeling that embraced the universe, and was pathetic even to tears in its expression to individuals.

The sun was low in that bright western heaven, and a cool breeze came floating upwards from the valleys, as Dorothy wan-

dered, sad and solitary, at a little distance from the noisy circle capering round and round on the hill-top. The eligible young men of the party had tried their hardest to induce Dorothy to join in their primitive sport, but she had drawn herself indignantly away from them; and there went a murmur round the circle to the effect that Miss Tursgood was keeping company with an officer, and was proud. The feminine portion of the company said "Stuck up!" and there were indignant exclamations of "Well, I'm sure!" "Did you ever see such airs?" "We must be engaged to a duke, I should think, at the very least!"

Dorothy walked away from them all with a swelling heart Kiss-in-the-ring, indeed, with all those vulgar warm half-tipsy people; and *he* was descended from Edward the Confessor! If he had only been a linendraper's apprentice he would have been with her all day, like Miss Spinner's young man, who had been perambulating the hills with his arm round the waist of his affianced in the eye of assembled mankind. And *he* was not coming at all; though he must have known how wearisome the long day would be to her without him. She could venture to cry now; and she did shed piteous tears under the shadow of her pretty hat—the hat she had decorated for him, for him, for him! Ah, miserable universe, which took all its light from him, and which became utter blackness and eclipse in his absence! And youth is such a delicious season, say the poets and romancers; and it is so sad to lose that early freshness of feeling; and the sound head of the philosopher is so miserable an exchange for the passionate heart of the boy. Is there not a cross-grain of falsehood in the fabric of this truth? Is not that rather a spurious sentimentality which makes a man look back to the days when he was flogged for a false quantity or forgotten tense, and fancy the usher's rod must have been so delightful? There are people who would envy Dorothy her youth and freshness; but is it so very delicious to wander lonely on a sunburnt hill-side, suffering tortures of bitter disappointment and wounded love for the sake of a dark-faced scamp in the marines, who never had been, and never could be, worth an honest woman's heart-ache? At eight-and-twenty Dorothy would have been wise enough to estimate the lieutenant's character at its just value, and to resign herself to the conviction that her only chance of happiness lay in sending him about his business at the earliest opportunity. At eighteen she thought of nothing, she remembered nothing, except that he had a straight nose and dark haggard eyes, and that she was ready to die for his sake; to die, as the Frenchwoman has it, not to save his life—that would be too easy a sacrifice—but to expire for no other reason than because he told her to die; to perish for the grati-

fication of his passing whim ; to throw away her existence in order that he might be pleased for a moment.

While she was thinking of his unkindness ; while the girlish heart ached as if with an open wound, the sound of a horse's hoofs was heard faintly in the distance, and all her sorrow was changed into joy. It was he. Who else should be riding to the Lemley Hills on that particular afternoon ? She ran to the ridge, below which the bridle-path wound upwards. Yes, it was he ; the clear bright eyes recognised that slender figure, mounted on a wretched grey hack, which had the impress of the livery stable upon its every limb. But if he had been mounted upon one of Phaeton's own team, or on one of those Venetian *cavalli sfrenati* which Peter Doria threatened to bridle, Dorothy could not have gazed upon him with fonder or more admiring eyes. She tripped lightly down the hill-side to meet him ; and he dismounted at a turn of the path, and walked up the slope by her side, leading the horse.

And Dorothy was happy. Her universe was light once more ; though the sun that illumined it might have been brighter. When they came to the top of the hill, Mr. Catheron tied his horse to a hurdle, and left the animal to take what refreshment he could from the sunburnt grass, while his rider walked away with Dorothy. The lieutenant was very gloomy ; and on being entreated piteously to reveal his sorrows, told his companion that things were as bad as they could be.

"I shall get kicked out of the confounded service if I don't take care, Dolly," he said ; "and then I suppose I must turn shoeblack or crossing-sweeper, or run backwards and forwards in the dust, selling Dorling's correct cards on Derby-days. You'd better give up all thoughts of me, Doll, and look out for somebody better worth having. I'm up to my eyes in trouble and difficulty, and—disgrace, I suppose some people would call it."

"And can nobody help you, Gervoise ?"

"Yes," answered the lieutenant almost fiercely ; "any body could help me by lending me a few pounds ! but nobody will do it."

"Oh, Gervoise, you know I would if I had the money."

"But you haven't got it, you see !" returned Mr. Catheron testily ; "so it's no use talking of it. If you had the national debt you'd lend it me, I dare say. There's lots of people who haven't got money who'd lend it me if they had it. I want to find the people who have got money, and will lend it."

Mr. Dobb, whose inconstant spirit had wearied of kiss-in-the-ring, suddenly perceived the two figures loitering side by side on the edge of the hill, and came bounding towards them

with his cut-away coat flapping on each side of him like a pair of wings.

"You go and have a game with the other ones, Dorothy," said the clerk; "Catheron and I have got something to say to each other."

Dorothy pouted, and looked appealingly at her lover.

"Yes, Doll," said the lieutenant, answering the look; "you go and amuse yourself with the others for a few minutes. Dobb wants to speak to me, and I want to speak to Dobb. Go—that's a darling."

The girl hesitated for a moment, a little indignant at this summary dismissal; and then the sweet womanly spirit triumphed over the sense of wounded dignity, and she released her lover's arm with a smile, and went away. His interests might be involved in this interview with Dobb, and was she to stand in his way—she whose love was such a slavish unquestioning devotion? She left the two men, but not to play at vulgar games with those noisy people, who were shouting and whooping at one another now in the convulsions of blind-man's-buff. She wandered alone, and at a distance from them, looking at the splendid sunset sky, and thinking very sadly of her lover's perplexities.

"Oh, if I were an heiress, like Miss Marcia!" she thought. "What happiness to take him all my money, and throw it under his feet!"

While Dorothy walked in one direction, Gervoise and the clerk paced slowly along the hill-side in the other.

"Well," said Mr. Dobb; "any news of the Postman?"

"Yes," answered the lieutenant; "he's receded in the betting, and now's the time to get on to him, if one had the chance; for he's as safe to win as a sovereign is to change into twenty shillings. There's been a report of his having got a strain in his trial; but the man that writes to me saw his trial, and warrants him to beat every thing that's out. I've got his letter in my pocket. I've waited all day, in hopes something would turn up that would enable me to send him a P.-O.-O. by to-night's post! but there's no chance, and the horse may go up with a run at any moment. You can read his letter if you like."

The fascinated Henry Adolphus was only too eager to peruse the precious document which Gervoise Catheron extracted from his waistcoat-pocket. It was a greasy little half-sheet of paper, and smelt strongly of stale tobacco.

"HONORED SIR," wrote Mr. Catheron's correspondent, "you can't do bad in laying to on the Postman as hard as you can lay. He's a sure card, he is, and there's a potful of money to be got

out of him—by them as has the spunk to go in and win. The scums are almost all on him.”

“What does he mean by ‘the scums’?” asked Mr. Dobb.

“Oh, that’s a way the swells have got of speaking of the book-men. ‘Send me one of those scums, will you?’ I want to back something.’ That’s what your heavy swell says when he wants to speculate; but the scums make the big fortunes; and I know a man who gives three hundred a year for his house in Tyburnia, and began life by selling oranges. There’s no good in your aristocrats coming any nonsense in the ring, you know. You remember what Lord George Bentinek said: ‘All men are equal on the turf, and under it!’ But you may as well go on with the letter.”

“The scums are almost all on him, and I shall have hard lines to plant your money; so you’d better send me a P.-O.-O. per return, and I’ll get the best terms I can for you.”

Mr. Dobb read and re-read the letter as he loitered at his friend’s side. Prudence had whispered to him to beware of Mr. Catheron, whose sanguine expectations had so often resulted in disappointment; but prudence whispered no warning against the writer of this mystic communication, whose tone implied so much experience—who wrote of the Postman as if his winning were a certainty.

“If I *had* the money,” said Henry Adolphus with sudden energy, “I’d lend it to you. Yes, I would, Catheron, though you’ve sold me more than once; but I haven’t got a stiver.”

There was a pause before the lieutenant responded to this speech; and when he did speak it was in a lower voice than usual. “But you could *get* the money,” he said, looking furtively at the clerk.

“How do you mean?”

“How do I mean! Come, Dobb, that won’t do, you know. You know what I mean well enough. It isn’t to be supposed that a confidential clerk, and a *collecting*-clerk, in such a business as Sloper and Halliday’s, hasn’t money at his command. I *am* a lieutenant in the marines, but I’m not *quite* an ass for all that. You know well enough where to get money when you want it.”

“*What!*” roared Henry Adolphus, turning savagely upon his companion. “Do you think I’d *steal* the money that passes through my hands in the way of business? What do you take me for?” cried Mr. Dobb. In the intensity of his indignation he for once in a way forgot to be facetious.

“Do I think you’d steal? That’s all stuff and nonsense, Dobb. Of course I know you wouldn’t steal. But who was talking about stealing? I’m sure I wasn’t. As *collecting*—

clerk for Sloper and Halliday, a considerable amount of money must pass through your hands ; and I've no doubt there are times and seasons when a considerable sum lies idle in your custody."

"Not often. Never when old Sloper is at home. I should like to see the old bird at it ! That's not the little game for him. Your money or your life are his sentiments, and he sticks to 'em. When he's at home the iron safe in our office is cleared out every day ten minutes before the bank closes, and the venerable party carries over the necessary evil himself in a canvas-bag. Oh, he's a downy old bird is old Sloper. If he *was* born yesterday, he must have improved the shining hour in the interim like any number of the *apis-mellifica* tribe. Seventeen-and-sixpence petty cash is about the utmost you'll find on our premises after banking-hours when he's at home."

"But how about it when he *isn't* at home ?"

"Well, when the ancient governor's out of the way there's a good deal of carelessness—*lesser Sally*, as our friend M. Jean Crapau would remark. Young Halliday's a heavy swell, you know. Had his draggings-up at Eton, keeps his five-and-twenty-tonner on the Merdrid, and is always cutting the shop for 'a wet sheet and a flowing sea, a wind that follows fast,' and that sort of thing, you know."

"Well, he isn't so sharp about the cash, is he ?"

"No ; he leaves the money in my custody for weeks together sometimes—but if you think I'd take any advantage of his confidence, you're addressing yourself to the wrong party ; and all I can say is, the individual *you* require is out of town, and not expected home for some time. So you'd better call this day three years, or next Monday twelvemonths, or at some equally approximate period," concluded Mr. Dobb, who had entirely recovered his self-possession and his Maddison-Mortonianism by this time.

The lieutenant bit his lips savagely.

"What a fool you are, Dobb !" he begun.

"Overpowered by this involuntary homage from a discriminating assembly, I rise to——"

"Drop that rot for once in a way, can't you ? If you think it's funny, I don't ; so you may as well reserve it for somebody who can appreciate that kind of humour. You are a fool, because you won't give a fellow time to make a proposition to you ; but before he can say half-a-dozen words, you begin to ride the high horse, and sermonise about your honesty, as if you'd been asked to steal the crown-jewels, or manufacture a million of money in forged exchequer-bills. What I've got to say is this : old Sloper has gone to spend the

autumn at Rotterdam with his wife and family, I know that as well as you do : and if Halliday leaves the money in your hands between this and the fifteenth, you may just as well make use of what you want as not. The Postman is safe to win——”

“But if he doesn’t?”

“I tell you he *must*. The fellows who are backing him are men who never make mistakes ; and they’re not likely to be out this time. You can get twenty to one if you send your money up at once.”

“I’ll see all the race-horses in Christendom in the bottomless pit first !” exclaimed Mr. Dobb ; “no, no, old fellow ; I’ve got a character to lose, and I’ve got a wife to keep. Try some other party. There’s the pious cashier at the Roxborough and Castleford bank, you know ; goes to church three times every Sunday—cold dinner at one o’clock, and prayers in the evening ; he’s the sort of party for a neat little forgery. I’m a reprobate, I am ; and I ain’t up to the embezzlement dodge.”

“Oh, very well,” answered Mr. Catheron ; “I dare say something else will turn up. Twopenny-Postman sha’n’t run without my having a few pounds upon him, if there’s money to be got in Castleford. Say no more about it.”

“I ain’t going to,” replied Mr. Dobb, with an energetic disregard of grammatical rule.

The two men turned, and walked silently towards the noisy group, who had gathered round a gipsy tea-kettle, and were winding up the entertainment with what Mrs. Dobb called a comfortable cup of tea, but what, upon the part of the gentlemen, seemed to be a comfortable glass of any thing that was to be had in the way of spirituous liquor. The lieutenant accepted a glass of brandy and water very sulkily, and then stood above the gipsy-fire smoking moodily, with the red light of the burning wood flickering on his face. Dorothy watched him sadly. He took so little notice of her. His thoughts seemed so far away from her ; oh, dear, what a painful passion this love was.

The Dobbites took their places in the omnibus by-and-by, with a great deal less ceremony and a great deal more skirmishing than had attended that operation in the morning. Some of the gentlemen were wildly gay, while others seemed possessed by a morbid melancholy. Some were slightly inclined to be captious, and others gave unmistakable evidence of a quarrelsome tendency. Some of the ladies were ill, and some were noisy. Mrs. Smith complained of the veal-pie lying heavy on her chest ; and Mrs. Spinner insisted on riding outside, and singing a Swiss song, with a

"La, ou, a," that was like the premonitory symptoms of seasickness, and was openly slapped by the scandalised Spinner. Dorothy rode outside, with Gervoise Catheron's sheltering arm surrounding her plump shoulders, and keeping off the cold ; and oh, all the disappointment of the day was amply recompensed by that delicious drive through the cool night-air, with a million golden stars above, and a beautiful shadowy landscape flitting by like a dream below. What did it matter that Mr. and Mrs. Spinner were quarrelling all the time? What did it matter that the vehicle had to be stopped more than once to obtain drams with a view to the settlement of that veal-pie on Mrs. Smith's chest, or that Henry Adolphus made the night hideous with comic songs? What did it matter that the party baited at roadside inns where rough men and boys came out to stare at them, as if they had been a show ; or that they went whooping through drowsy little villages, where the lights were twinkling dimly in bed-room windows, and where scared villagers peered from their casements, as at a troop of noisy demons? What did any thing matter? Her lover was by her side ; and life was beautiful.

Gervoise Catheron parted sulkily from his friend the brewer's-clerk, declining to enter that gentleman's hospitable mansion, although Dorothy begged him to do so ; for she was to sleep in her cousin's spare room, and had looked forward to the delight of an evening which would not be broken by her early departure. He left the party immediately after assisting Dorothy to alight, and went back to his quarters alone. But he saw Mr. Dobb in Castleford the next day, and again the day after that ; and he had a long talk with him in his office on the following day ; and by that night's post money-orders for a considerable amount went up to Mr. Catheron's friend in London, to be hazarded on the fortunes of Two-penny-Postman, half in the name of the lieutenant, half in the name of the clerk.

And in the bosom of his family that night Mr. Dobb was dull and gloomy, while his faint attempts at the facetious had a ghastly air that struck terror to the tender heart of his devoted partner.

CHAPTER XXV.

MARCIA'S FESTIVAL.

THE widow arrived at the Abbey a day or two after the picnic on Lemley Hills, and once more Sir Jasper was gratified by the sight of that superb matron. She was looking her best, and seemed in very high spirits. The open carriage that had brought her from Roxborough station had passed the deserted Hermitage, and at sight of the closed shutters Mrs. Harding had leaned forward to speak to the servant sitting next the coachman.

"Has Mr.—Mr.—Pauncefort left Scarsdale?" she asked.

"Yes, Ma'am."

"For good?"

"I believe so, Ma'am."

The warm carnation of the widow's cheek deepened, and a bright flash of triumph illumined her eyes with a more vivid light than that which she imparted to them by the application of belladonna.

"The bolder game is always wisest," she thought. "I was half inclined to write and ask Marcia if he was still here; but that would have looked bad, and Miss Denison is very artful. Those quiet people always are artful."

She awakened from this reverie to find herself at the foot of the broad stone stairs leading to the terrace where Sir Jasper and his daughter awaited her coming; and in the next moment she was embracing her darling Marcia with more than ordinary effusion.

"And looking so well, too, you sweet pet," she murmured fondly; "and dear Sir Jasper looks younger than ever. Ah, if you would only tell *me* your secret! I really should like to know how you manage it," she added archly, shaking the plumes in her dazzling bonnet coquettishly as she addressed the Baronet.

He liked it. Alas for human weakness! He knew that she was false and hollow, the most cindery and bitter of all the fruits that ever flourished on the shores of falsehood's Dead Sea; he knew that she would have bartered her soul for any of the sordid prizes earth has to give; he knew the shallow mysteries of her mind and soul almost as fully as if he had known every secret of her life; and yet he liked her for the sake of her colour and brightness, the gaudy beauty of her

face, the harmonious lines of her figure. He liked her as we like a gorgeous tropical bird, which we caress cautiously with an uncertain hand, knowing that at any moment its cruel beak may close on the fingers that are fondling it.

From the hour of the widow's arrival Marcia resigned her place as her father's companion. There are daughters who will bring to bear the patient diplomacy of a female Talleyrand against such an interloper as Mrs. Harding; but Miss Denison was quite incapable of protecting her position by any thing in the way of artifice. As she had been content to stand aside forgotten and neglected in her childhood, while her father's love was given to a brighter rival, so was she contented to resign him now if he pleased to bestow the shallower sentiments of his empty heart upon this bold handsome stranger. For his own sake she regretted his predilection for the widow, and was prepared to expostulate with him openly on his folly if she could find the occasion for so doing without overstepping the limits of her duty as his daughter. For herself—ah, how completely all interests and affections of hers were submerged in the tide of her life's one passion! She could think of a separation from her father without a pang—she could resign herself to a lonely, desolate future without a tear. All minor sorrows were absorbed in the one mighty grief of her life, as all minor affections were merged in the one great love.

And she could feel all this, and yet endure her existence and take her place at the breakfast-table every morning, and attend to her simple domestic duties, never once letting the urn overflow the table-cloth, or putting a grain of superfluous sugar in her father's tea. Surely there is something heroic in the quiet endurance of these drawing-room martyrs, who cover their *stigmata* with cambric and lace, and smile conventional smiles, and talk conventional talk while the wounds are still bleeding.

How many mornings Marcia Denison had discussed the aspect of the sky and the contents of the post-bag with the same polite interest in her father's conversation, while her mind was filled with the memory of some cruel dream in which she had seen him—ill, or wounded, or dying, or in danger—while an unseen influence had held her spell-bound and powerless to help him! And now that the widow had returned, poor Marcia had to endure the slow torture of a lively companion, and the prying gaze of eyes that had graduated in every school where worldly wisdom is to be learned.

"She may worm herself into my father's confidence and trade upon the weakest attributes of his character; but she shall never read my secrets or insult my sorrow by her mock

sympathy," thought Miss Denison, after resisting one of the widow's most artfully-planned attacks.

And she did baffle Mrs. Harding most completely. The gushing Blanche could make nothing out of this cold proud woman, who kept her at bay with such chilling politeness. Whether she had an enemy in Marcia—an enemy who would interfere to frustrate her schemes—or whether the girl's proud bearing only masked a great sorrow, was a question which Mrs. Harding was not able to decide. But she would have felt more comfortable if Sir Jasper's daughter had been a different sort of person. She was prepared to meet with opposition in the path that led to the winning of the prize she had set herself to obtain. She was prepared to play the common game of check and counter-check, to outscheme a schemer; but the non-resistant force of a person whose manner is hostile, and whose action is neutral, is not very easy to cope withal. If Miss Denison had seemed friendly, the widow would have been happy: but that lady was too well versed in the expression of a face or the tones of a voice not to know that Miss Denison disliked her. Knowing this, she would fain have had Marcia out in the open field of antagonism, and have done battle for the prize she coveted. Marcia's manner mystified her: and when she was brightest and most bewitching, flushed and triumphant with the consciousness of having tightened the coils of her shadowy network around her victim, the terror of Sir Jasper's daughter sent an icy shiver through her false heart, and she grew pale and sick with the fear of some crushing blow from the hand that had so long been idle, as if drawn back in readiness for the fatal stroke.

"She knows something about me," thought the widow, when she brooded over Marcia's chilling manner. "He told her, of course: not the truth, but quite enough to ruin me. He would be likely to tell her every thing before he went away: for I know he had fallen in love with her pale face and her grand manner: and he did the heroic, I suppose, at last, and made a clean breast of it. And my lady is hoarding her secret until she sees her father ready to make me Lady Denison, and then she will step forward and denounce me. She looks just the sort of woman to do such a thing as that."

The widow, standing by her bed-room window in the moonlight, with her long black hair falling in an undulating snake-like line upon her white dressing-gown, looked "just the sort of woman" to do any dark deed that was ever done by female hands, and not to be sorry for it afterwards. She had disliked Marcia from the very first hour of their acquaintance, with the instinctive aversion which a thoroughly wicked woman generally feels for a very good one: but her hatred had grown

murderous of late, since she had become possessed with the idea that Marcia would be able to overthrow all her plans in the very hour of her triumph.

Some of the greatest mistakes of life arise from the fact that people generally base all their arguments respecting the conduct and motives of others upon their knowledge of themselves. Mrs. Harding was so complete a schemer that she could only see in Marcia's apparent neutrality the policy of a still deeper diplomatist. She saw that Sir Jasper's daughter stood aside and allowed her to spread her airy nets and prepare her dainty nooses, and feather her delicate flies, and angle as she pleased for her mighty fish, or lay what snares she would for her bird of golden plumage, and yet she could not give the girl credit for being simply too proud and high-minded to stoop to any underhand interference. The more entirely Marcia stood aloof, the more profound grew the widow's belief in her power to shatter all the fabric of her airy castle. She fancied Marcia doing what she would have enjoyed doing herself, crouching cat-like until the moment for the fatal spring. In a poem of these latter days—a poem which is like a picture by Landseer done into printer's ink, and which the great animal-painter might well choose as a subject for his marvellous pencil—it has been suggested that Cleopatra began life as a tigress, gamboling on the yellow sands of an untrodden shore, and prowling in the trackless depths of a primeval forest. It would have been easy for any one who had studied Mrs. Harding to imagine that she had spent the dawn of her existence in the guise of a cat; not a sleepy, contented, domestic animal, but a sleek brindled rat-hunter, a Nimrod of dark sewers and foul underground labyrinths, a stealthy prowling destroyer, a ruthless green-eyed devourer of mean and loathsome prey.

It had been a custom at Scarsdale to give some entertainment to the neighbouring school-children every summer or autumn, whether the family was at the Abbey or not. The usual time for this festival had drifted by; for Marcia had been utterly depressed in body and mind after that stormy interview in the Hermitage, and had deferred from day to day the effort necessary for the organisation of the entertainment. But she would no more have disappointed her young pensioners than she would have broken the most solemn promise ever made; and she held a solemn council with Mrs. Browning and the curate, Mr. Silbrook, almost immediately after the fascinating widow's arrival. Mrs. Harding's visit had not been without its benefit for Marcia, disagreeable though her presence might be. The widow's society acted as a kind of irritant, and aroused Sir

Jasper's daughter from the dull lethargy into which her mind had sunk after Godfrey Pierrepont's departure. Mr. Silbrook attended Marcia's summons with rapture, and presented himself in the yellow drawing-room, where Miss Denison and the widow were seated as far apart as politeness would permit. Marcia was busied in the cutting-out of comfortable woollen garments for her poor; while Dorothy sat meekly by, sewing with a clever rapid hand, in which the needle twinkled every now and then as it shot upward into the sunshine. Mrs. Harding had been so gushingly anxious for a morning's chat with her dearest Marcia, that Miss Denison had been fain to bring her work-basket to the drawing-room.

"But Dorothy is accustomed to work with me," she had said; "and I scarcely know how I shall get on without her."

"Then pray bring Dorothy, my sweet Marcia," exclaimed Mrs. Harding. "You surely cannot think that I am too proud to accept the companionship that pleases you. Besides, I have taken quite a fancy to dear little Dorothy. Who is it has talked about 'surprised blue eyes?' Some poet, I think. Dorothy's big brown eyes have a look of astonishment sometimes that is really charming."

So this is how Dorothy came to be established in the yellow drawing-room, seated modestly on a footstool, with her brown curls just on a level with Marcia's work-table,—below the salt, as it were. Miss Denison was very glad to have her faithful little companion seated at her feet on this particular morning; for Dorothy's presence would be likely to ward off anything in the way of confidential conversation; and Marcia had a horror of any confidence arising between herself and this bold, scheming, false-tongued woman, who had traduced Godfrey Pierrepont.

Mr. Silbrook was announced presently; and the widow became deeply interested in the object of his visit. If the entertainment of charity-children had been the most novel or soul-absorbing amusement that ever aroused feminine enthusiasm, Mrs. Harding could scarcely have been more enthusiastic than she was.

"The dear children—what happiness to give them pleasure; and how noble of dear sweet Marcia to think of taking so much trouble!" cried the widow, with more warmth of expression than soundness of logic: and then she listened with an air of rapture while Miss Denison and the curate discussed the arrangement of the festival; the hour for dinner in a tent on the lawn; the gipsy-tea in a grassy circle in the wood—a circle which the country people called the fairy-ring, and close to which rustic spot there was a broad babbling brook, and a tiny waterfall that trickled over moss-grown stones and lost its way amid the rank luxuriance of fern.

Mrs. Harding was charmed with these arrangements, but ventured to offer little propositions of her own, in the way of liny white tents, festooned with pink cambric roses, in which the village children might have curds-and-whey and pound-cake, and syllabub and tarts, and all manner of bilious refreshments : or might not the children be dressed in fancy costume, she asked—some of them as dryads or hamadryads, or whatever you called the quaint classical creatures ; and some as little Redriding Hoods, and Swiss peasants, and Spanish gipsies ? It would be so sweet and picturesque, and the very thing to please dear Sir Jasper. And she would be so happy to assist in carrying out the little scheme : for though so stupidly ignorant of all sorts of plain needlework such as dear Marcia excelled in, she had a kind of talent she ventured to say, for the arrangement of a mediæval quadrille, or *tableaux vivants*, or anything picturesque in that way.

“And *apropos* to *tableaux vivants*,” exclaimed the widow, “why should we not get up something in that way, as a surprise for dear Sir Jasper ? Some pretty sylvan scene—Rosalind and Celia—a little series of pictures from *As you like It*. If Mr. Silbrook would only do Jacques !” cried Mrs. Harding, clasping her hands, and overwhelming the curate with confusion by her sudden address. “I do think Mr. Silbrook is the very man for Jacques—just the mild contemplative expression,” she added, gazing critically at the unhappy young man, who felt his complexion changing to the dreadful hue of a newly-boiled lobster. “Don't you think so, now, Marcia ?”

Miss Denison, compassionately conscious of the timid curate's embarrassment, bent over her work as she murmured that she had seen a person who reminded her more vividly of the pensive exile ; and then after politely negativing Mrs. Harding's propositions, she went on to complete the plan of the children's day.

“Then at twelve o'clock on the fifteenth we shall expect the arrival of the vans,” said Marcia ; “and there will be a distribution of cake and sweet wine in one of the tents. After that we will have games in the park until two ; at two dinner ; and after dinner more games, I suppose until tea-time. Six o'clock, I think we had better say for tea ; and after tea it will be almost time for the children from the distant villages to think about the journey home. I have engaged the Roxborough town-band, and I have written to a person in London for a magic-lantern, to be shown in the servant's hall, which can be darkened for the purpose. I'll send one of the grooms into Roxborough this afternoon, to make arrangements about the vans ; and if you will settle matters with the teachers, Mr. Silbrook, I think we shall manage very well.”

A confused mumbling, which might mean anything or nothing, was the only utterance which that unhappy young man could give to his overpowering sense of Marcia Denison's goodness. He gazed upon her in a rapture of admiring love; and yet his pale-blue eyes expressed only weakness. His heart was thrilled to the very core with a rapturous emotion in her presence, and yet he could not accomplish the most commonplace sentence without ignominious stuttering and hesitation. Oh, pity them, those unhappy souls who lack the power of utterance! The sculptor has his marble, the architect his palace, the writer his book, the painter his canvas, in which to give utterance, more or less fully, to the deep yearnings of his soul. But how much to be pitied are those hapless creatures whom nature has deprived of that grandest of all gifts, the power of expression; who look piteously into the faces of their fellow-men, and see themselves despised by men to whom they know themselves superior; who see themselves pushed aside by vulgar charlatans, and are yet possessed of knowledge that would put charlatanism to shame! Pity the mute Milton who dies inglorious for lack of some minor force, without which the great gift of poetry is powerless to reveal itself; the sculptor who, with the genius of a Michael Angelo, shrinks back to oblivion aghast and disheartened by the first ruthless sneer of an ignorant critic. Pity—above all blighted creatures doomed to bear the burden of earthly sorrow—the men and women *who might have been great*. And second only to these in the roll of martyrdom are the men and women who have loved devotedly, and have never dared to reveal their passion.

Mr. Silbrook rose to depart presently, after having declined an invitation to a luncheon that would have been to him as a banquet eaten amidst the citron-groves of Milton's paradise. He was moving towards the door, twisting his hat hopelessly in his warm nervous hands, murmuring unintelligible *à-veux*; but instead of ringing the bell for the servant, Marcia rose and pointed to one of the open windows.

"If you will go by the terrace, Mr. Silbrook, I will show you my china asters," she said.

The curate made his way across the room in a little hesitating scamper, and in the next minute found himself on the terrace, standing by Marcia's side: alone—with her.

And she had asked him to come out there, alone! She had something to say to him—something that could not be said before that gorgeous person who had put him to shame in the drawing-room. He felt his heart beating like the pumping of an engine; he felt his knees dissolving into jelly, and his legs giving way under him. The hot blood surged up

into his head, and made his eyes weaker than ever. A mist swam before them. Was he going blind or mad—or both? He had a vague recollection of a wonderful poem by Elizabeth Barrett Browning called *Lady Geraldine's Courtship*—a poem in which a grand lady asks a peasant-born poet to be her husband. He had a still more shadowy recollection of a dozen different novels, in which loveliness and wealth had stooped to bless the humble adorer. And he loved her so dearly, so fondly, so truly. How could she be ignorant of such unselfish devotion, or blind to such patient worship? She knew the secrets of his timid heart, and she was about to reward him by stooping from her high station to tell him that his love was not hopeless.

Winstanley Silbrook had time enough to think this while Marcia strolled by his side to the end of the terrace, below which blazed the gorgeous colouring of nature in the shape of a parterre of china asters.

"Are they not very fine?" asked Marcia, pointing to the flowers.

The curate, short-sighted always, saw dimmer of vision than usual to-day. He saw confused splashes of gaudy colour blazing in the sunshine; and murmured his admiration. But the pumping of the engine still went on under his clerical waistcoat, and he wondered how Marcia was going to approach the subject of this thrilling interview.

"I thought you would admire our show of autumn flowers," said Miss Denison, as they went down the broad flight of steps into the stiff Italian garden; "but I had another motive for asking you to come this way." The engine pumped more furiously than ever; and the curate began to think that he must ask his divinity for a glass of water, or else give up the ghost and swoon quietly on the smooth gravelled mall. "I wish to say something that I did not care to say before Mrs. Harding or Dorothy. Do you remember telling me last Christmas of the anonymous donations dropped into the Scarsdale poor-box?"

The engine left off pumping all at once; and that sudden stoppage seemed more painful than all the furious action of the past five minutes. The curate turned deadly white, and a faint sick feeling crept over him. In the next minute he recovered himself. What a fool he had been! "As if she could care for me—or notice my feelings," he thought, in piteous self-abasement.

"Do you remember?" asked Marcia.

"Yes, yes. Oh yes, perfectly."

"Have the donations been continued since then?"

"Until last July—yes. Before July they were very ir-

regular ; since that time the donations in the box have ceased ; but only a week ago I received fifty pounds in notes for the poor of Scarsdale, and it is very probable that the gift comes from the same benefactor. I think I have the envelope in my pocket. Perhaps you would like to see it ? ”

“ If you please. ”

The curate searched for the document. To say that he produced half-a-dozen different papers—a receipted washing-bill, a bootmaker’s account, a letter from his grandmother, a little evangelical tract, and so on—before he possessed himself of the paper he wanted, is only to say that he comported himself after the manner of a nervous and hyper-sensitive person. He found the envelope at last, and handed it to Marcia.

Yes, it was *his* hand, as she had expected. Stiff and disguised, but still Godfrey Pierrepont’s hand—the only hand which could by no possibility be disguised from her. The envelope was half covered with foreign stamps ; and the post-mark was Vienna. He had not left Europe, then. It seemed as if he were quite close at hand at Vienna. How clear it all seemed now ; and how natural that he who had visited so much amongst the poor, and had listened so patiently to their stories of want and trouble, should have been their anonymous benefactor all the time ; too proud to take any credit for his bounties ; content to incur the hazard of being misjudged by the people who profited by his generosity !

Marcia returned the envelope to Mr. Silbrook.

“ I think you must have acted very wisely with regard to the disposal of the money, ” she said, “ or your anonymous friend would have scarcely continued his donations. ”

The curate blushed, and a sickly smile flickered over his inexpressive countenance. Even this little bit of praise from her was a crumb of comfort. “ I did my best, Miss Denison, ” he answered very humbly. “ I am a great deal among the Scarsdale poor, and I know their little wants. I have not many pleasures, and I assure you the disposal of that money has been a very great pleasure to me. ”

“ Has it really ? Then will you let me give you another fifty pounds to dispose of in the same manner ? ” asked Marcia, who felt somehow that to duplicate Godfrey Pierrepont’s gift would be in some manner to associate herself with his secret charity.

“ You are too good, Miss Denison, but indeed it is not needed. I have more than twenty pounds of the anonymous fund still in hand. I keep that money apart from all other funds, and I have a little book in which I enter all outgoings. Perhaps you would like to see my book. I venture to hope

that a great deal of good has been done, under Providence, by the aid of that money. David Green's family have had an allowance of ten shillings a-week ever since David was laid up; he's beginning to get round a little now, and I assure you he and his people are very grateful for having been carried over their troubles without going to the parish. Widow Morris has had three pounds ten towards the purchase of a mangle, and she seems to be doing very nicely now; and the children attend school regularly instead of working in the fields, as they did before, for sixpence a-day. Margery Holmes had five pounds for clothes to enable her to get out to service; but that was put more in the way of a loan, and we expect Margery to repay us by easy instalments: and Susan West—who—who, you may remember, some time since—to have heard—or perhaps I ought not to mention it in your presence, and yet as a Christian minister—I—the unhappy girl being—I assure you—most penitent—and, although perhaps I have no right to allude—yet the recollection of the—the—blessed words with relation to those who are without sin, and those only, having the right to cast a stone—I have ventured on advancing a little money to send her up to a most admirable institution in the metropolis—though I regret to say rather Puseyite in its tendencies—where she will be qualified as a sick-nurse, and will, I hope, be given opportunities of real usefulness. But I'll bring you my book the next time I—I have the pleasure of calling, Miss Denison; and any advice you may kindly have to offer, I—need scarcely say—er—I shall make a—per—point—”

Here the subject became in a manner personal, and the curate broke down. But Marcia was very kind to him, and promised to give him her best thoughts with regard to the anonymous donations, if he had any need of her advice, and additional help whenever he wanted help. She accompanied the curate to the little gate opening from the Italian garden into the park, and shook hands with him very cordially as she wished him good-bye. She liked him for his goodness and his modesty, and she had not the faintest suspicion of the troubled state of his poor honest heart.

She went slowly back to the drawing-room, for it had been some comfort to her to escape so long from the widow. And in the mean time that vivacious personage had been making the best use of her opportunity, and had subjected poor innocent little Dorothy to a protracted operation of that kind which is commonly called “pumping.”

Was dear Miss Denison always so bright and industrious? Did not dear Miss Denison sometimes find herself very dull and lonely? Had not dear Miss Denison very much missed

her papa's friend Mr. Pauncefort? Were not Mr. Pauncefort and dear Miss Denison very intimate?

Dorothy shook her head till the crisp brown curls danced again.

No; Miss Denison was never dull or lonely, but always had so much to employ her—drawing, and practising, and reading; oh, reading so very, very much. And Miss Denison had seen scarcely anything of Mr. Pauncefort since Mrs. Harding's last visit; and Dorothy was quite sure she did not miss him a bit.

The widow grew thoughtful after obtaining this information. She had been picking up beads on the point of her needle, while she had talked to Dorothy, for the decoration of a very gorgeous pair of slippers which she was embroidering for Sir Jasper; and now she sat pushing her needle dreamily about among the glittering atoms of glass, ruminating upon what she had heard.

If Marcia's intimacy with Godfrey Pierrepont had made no advance since the spring, was it likely that he would have told her the secrets of his life? It was very possible that Marcia knew nothing, after all, and in that case she was powerless to frustrate the widow's schemes.

"I will try and think she knows nothing, at any rate," thought the widow; "I can effect nothing by a timid policy; and if I fail—I fail. I am not playing quite so desperate a game as Lady Macbeth; and even she was willing to abide the issue."

CHAPTER XXVI.

GENTLEMANLY CHANTAGE.

THE morning sunshine on the fifteenth of September promised fairly for the adventurous spirits who hurried northward behind rushing railway engines, and those still more enthusiastic votaries of the turf who paid their nightly guineas for uncomfortable beds in the sleepy little town of Doncaster, broad awake only for this one autumn week in all the year. The little northern town was bright in the sunshine, flags fluttered in the cool fresh breezes, the vendors of toothsome butter-scotch were blithe and busy, and the noise of many tongues sounded on the morning air. Between the town and the race-

course there was one throng of pushing pedestrians, who took possession of the high-road, and defied the boldest of charioteers or the most desperate of postillions. How many of those men would go back the same way in the dusky evening gloomy and crest-fallen, was a question which no one cared to ask himself at that early stage of the day's business. Every man in the crowd pushed onward as cheerily as if he had been going to certain fortune.

But if the bright autumn weather afforded satisfaction to those world-worn votaries of the turf who had waded knee-deep in the mud and slush of the Knavesmire, and tramped on Epsom Downs when that broad open country was no better walking than a ploughed field; who had stood in the blinding rain to see the settlement of a dead-heat between two favourites, and had held their places in the ring when the thunder shook the ground under their feet, and the lightning flashed into their eyes until they could scarcely see the figures in their betting-books,—if to such men as these a fine day were matter for rejoicing, what was it to the village children who were to enjoy Miss Denison's festival? A great many pairs of innocent eyes kept watch for that September dawn; a great many guileless hearts beat happily at sight of that faint glow of yellow light in the east, which brightened as the day grew older.

As the clock in Sir Jasper's study struck twelve, the bells of Scarsdale church struck up a merry peal, and a chorus of shrill voices sounded on the lawn. The Baronet shuddered, and turned with a deprecating gesture to Mrs. Harding, who stood by the open window, arrayed in the freshest of peach-coloured muslins, and the most innocent of Leghorn bonnets.

"Agreeable, isn't it, Ma'am?" said Sir Jasper. "This is what comes of having a philanthropic daughter. I hope you are not philanthropic, Mrs. Harding."

The widow simpered. "I fear I am not nearly so good as Miss Denison; and I only wish I were more like your sweet daughter," she said; "and yet even poor I cannot help feeling some pleasure in witnessing the innocent happiness of my fellow-creatures."

"Don't be good, Mrs. Harding," cried the Baronet; "if you wish to remain fascinating, don't be good. I don't know why the two things should be incompatible, but I have always found them so. It is an unhappy fact, but the people who have left their mark upon the world have not been what is generally called good people. How many times will you hear Richard Brinsley Sheridan's name for every time you hear the names of John Howard or William Penn? See how we talk of Swift and Sterne, Chesterfield and Walpole, the Prince

Regent and Lord Byron. But who ever talks of Captain Coram or Elizabeth Fry? The verses which Oliver Goldsmith wrote about the village parson will live for ever; but who remembers the parson himself? For one person who knows anything about St. Augustine, fifty are familiar with the most insignificant details in the life of Voltaire, from the time when he was beaten before the face of mankind by De Rohan's lackeys, to the day when he was spilt out of a postchaise with Madame de Chatelet and her bandboxes: and he endured it all with the same noble calm—the beating, the bandboxes, and the fascinating vixenish blue-stocking. Wonderful man! Is it strange that we admire him? No, Mrs. Harding, it is very sad; but the biographies of the wicked people are infinitely more diverting than the lives of saints and philanthropists. But go, Mrs. Harding; be happy with Marcia's charity-children, and forget me."

The widow executed that little manoeuvre, which was almost as good as blushing, and murmured that Sir Jasper's conversation was more delightful to her than any rustic festivity that was ever devised since that illustrious period which Watteau has made familiar to us, when the upper ten thousand seemed to have devoted their leisure to sitting on the grass, drinking champagne out of tall slender glasses, and dancing minuets in broad daylight to the accompaniment of an amateur violinist.

"If I could tempt you to come out upon the terrace," pleaded the widow, "I really think the air would do you good."

Sir Jasper hesitated a little, looked at his beloved fire, and then at the blue bright sky, and then at his magnificent visitor.

"I really think I will," he said. "The imprudence may cost me my life; but, so tempted, the wisest man might peril his paltry existence. I'll ring for an overcoat, and join you."

It was an understood thing that the Baronet was an invalid, and always must be an invalid; and no one ventured to breathe a suspicion that he had nothing whatever the matter with him. But there were many who did suspect that fact nevertheless, and amongst these infidels was the country surgeon who attended him.

The Baronet had abandoned his dressing-gown for a civilised morning dress since the widow's arrival, but he still enjoyed all those little privileges which only an invalid can claim without offence. The most comfortable easy-chairs, and the cosiest corners of the room, were sacred to Sir Jasper. If Sir Jasper's visitor rose to leave the room, Sir Jasper was

not expected to spring from his chair and intercept her steps in order to open the door. If he felt inclined to shirk the trouble of dressing for dinner, a little languid shiver and faintly-plaintive sigh, or the remark that he was a shade worse than usual, were all-sufficient to excuse his breach of etiquette. If he wanted a nap after dinner, he took it without disguise; and his slumbers were soothed by the hushed murmurs of the widow, who observed to her sweet Marcia that it was so delightful to see her dear papa getting a little rest. The indignation of the county families excluded from friendly intercourse with their neighbour was in some measure appeased when they were informed that poor Sir Jasper Denison was much the same as usual—neither better nor worse.

And in the mean time the Sybarite read his favourite books, and sipped his most ethereal hocks out of fragile glasses that might have been manufactured by fairy glass-blowers; and everyone around and about him bowed down to him and did him homage.

He strolled upon the terrace with Mrs. Harding, while Marcia and the curate and half-a-dozen teachers and all the household of the Abbey were busy with the great event of the day. The widow made herself supremely delightful, and Sir Jasper quaffed deeply from the Circean chalice. He liked it—he liked it! He knew that she was more or less false, perhaps even worthless; he knew that her silence on the subject of her antecedents was terribly ominous; he knew that she had been denounced, by a man whom he instinctively believed, as a runaway wife, a heartless and cruel mother; and yet the caressing sound of her voice, the subtle flatteries involved in her conversation, the charm of her splendid beauty, the style of her perfect dress, all these things were very delightful to him; and as he loitered by her side on the bright sunny terrace, he was pondering the possibility of securing these pleasures to himself for ever.

A man does not read Voltaire for nothing. The inveterate *persifleur* is the most unprincipled of creatures. Can any thing upon earth be really sacred, can any thing on earth or in heaven possess any solemn significance, for the man who makes himself and his own pleasure the centre of the universe?

"I don't suppose she is a good woman," mused Sir Jasper, following out the thesis he had started in his conversation with the widow; "and there must be something rather queer about her marriage with that fellow Harding, or she would scarcely be so very close about it. But if I like her and can marry her, am I to deprive myself of the pleasure of her society because she is a little reserved about her antecedents? Cleopatra had been carried in a bundle to Cæsar before her

galley sailed down the Cydnus to meet Mark Antony; and Louis the Well-beloved succeeded Sainte Foye in the affections of beautiful Mademoiselle Lange (otherwise Marie-Jeanne Gomard Vaubernier), very much as he succeeded Pharamond upon the throne of France. There are people who will call me a fool, I dare say, if I marry the delightful widow; but shall I be any the worse for being called a fool? I was called a fool when I gave three hundred guineas for my Psyche; but the picture will sell at Christie's for a thousand when I am dead. Why should I not please myself in the choice of a wife as well as in the selection of a picture? And Marcia—— But of course Marcia will marry sooner or later, though I fear all this anxiety about charity-children is rather a diagnostic of approaching old-maidism."

Something to this effect ran the musings of the Baronet while he dawdled by Mrs. Harding's side in as dreamy a state of mind as if he had been chewing the cud of a repast of lotuses, or as the grammarians would have it, *loti*. He was very far removed from that noble security of purpose in which he had quoted his *Pickwick*, and laughed to scorn the dangerous machinations of this elegant Mrs. Bardell. Mrs. Bardell had been absent from him and life without Bardell had seemed very dreary. She had taught him to understand her value, and he had missed the brightness of her full-blown beauty as he would have missed his finest Etty, if the picture had been taken away and only a dismal blank patch of empty wall left in its place. The thought of losing her again—losing her for ever, perhaps, by reason of her going away and fascinating some other elderly baronet—was very terrible to him. He did not want to marry her. He was a great deal too selfish to wish to do anything that involved trouble, or might bring down ridicule upon himself; but he wanted to secure her; he wanted to be sole proprietor of that soft caressing voice, those undulating and graceful, not to say cat-like movements, and all the life and colour of that somewhat florid beauty.

"There might be times when I should find her a nuisance," thought the Baronet. "Even one's dearest friend is apt to degenerate into a nuisance. I dare say Orestes was often bored by Pylades, and Damon occasionally weary of Pythias, and Socrates tired of Plato, and Pope disgusted with Bolingbroke, and Lamb heartily sick of Coleridge. But I could send her to the sea-side for change of air, or pack her off on a round of visits, or get rid of her in some equally civil manner. She would be mine—my goods, my chattels, my house, my household stuff, my field, my barn; and it's not likely I should allow her to become a nuisance."

The great clock in the stable-tower struck two while Sir

Jasper and the widow still loitered on the terrace ; and Marcia joined them presently, looking very bright and pretty, with a flush upon her cheeks. It is quite impossible to make other people happy without being somewhat infected by their happiness. A great shout rose above the trees in the park as Marcia appeared upon the terrace-steps.

"I've not seen such nice feeling in your face for the last six months, my dear," murmured the Baronet as he greeted his daughter.

"They are just sitting down to dinner, papa," said Miss Denison. "They were to give three cheers for you, the teachers told me, before grace was said. The tables are charmingly decorated, and really that dear good Mrs. Browning and all the servants have done wonders. I only wish you had been in the great marquee just now, papa. Browning and I peeped in at the children through an opening at the back. You never saw so many happy faces. You have really lost a treat."

"Never mind, my love," returned the Baronet languidly ; "I don't much care for that class of subjects. Wilkie did some very nice things in that way ; and that sort of thing engraves very well, and is sure to be popular in second-rate inn-parlours and furnished apartments at the sea-side. I am very glad your young *protégées* are enjoying themselves, my dear, since their enjoyment is gratifying to you ; but if you think that I could derive any pleasure from hearing myself shouted at three-times-three and a little one in, or any thing of that kind—or from the appalling spectacle of two or three hundred voracious children gorging themselves with very red beef—though why it should always be underdone on these occasions is a mystery I have never yet been able to fathom,—if you think any thing of that kind could give me pleasure, you have a meaner opinion of me than I should have imagined it possible for you to have."

Of course Mrs. Harding was enthusiastic about the dear children, but she took care to keep her enthusiasm within bounds ; for it was the taste of Sir Jasper she had to consult rather than that of Miss Denison, whom it seemed so very hard a task to conciliate.

The Baronet accompanied the ladies to the dining-room, or rather to that cosy wainscoted apartment in which he always dined ; for the dining-room at Searsdale was an appalling apartment, as large as a moderate-sized church, and hung with smoky-looking family-portraits, in which here a ghastly face and there a pallid arm or a bony hand appeared out of a background of darkness. Some of the pictures were supposed to be very fine, and *connoisseurs* went into raptures about the concentration of light here, and the marvellous truthfulness of texture, or the wonderful fidelity of detail there, and the ex

traordinary depth of tone everywhere. But Sir Jasper shrugged his shoulders, and made light of the family Holbeins and Vandykes.

"Holbein was a very great person, and there is a small portrait of an old Dutch fellow at Dulwich which is a marvel of realistic painting," said the Baronet; "but then I don't care for realistic painting. Give me the creator, and not the man who is only a draughtsman. Give me the poet from whose enchanted brush every object derives sublimation. My Etty used to invest his commonest models with the divinity of grace. He never painted what he saw—he painted what he felt; and the students in the life Academy wondered as they looked over his shoulder and compared the creature on his canvas with the faded model. You cannot get goddesses for a shilling an hour. The divinity must be in the painter's mind. Since Queensbury will not unveil her patrician loveliness, the painter must lend the grace of the duchess to the handmaid who serves as a model for his Helen. I don't believe Etty ever saw the original of my Psyche except in his inspired dreams. I don't believe Rome ever looked as glorious as Turner has painted her."

The Baronet trifled with his airy biscuit and sipped his goblet of Vichy water and pale sherry while the two ladies took their luncheon. He was in a particularly amiable temper, and inclined to be gracious to every one to-day. So far as it was in him to feel so romantic a sentiment, Sir Jasper Denison was in love. He could scarcely admit the fact even to himself; for it seemed such a pitiful climax to his philosophy. But he found himself basking in the sunshine of Mrs. Harding's smiles, and he was dimly conscious that his feelings were more juvenile than his arguments.

After luncheon they went back to the terrace, whither the widow with her own hands carried a light basket-work chair for Sir Jasper's accommodation. Nor was she content with that attention; she went backwards and forwards to fetch a footstool, and sofa pillows, and a tiger-skin rug, and behaved very much as she might have done if her host had been in the last stage of consumption.

He liked it. Yes, unhappily Sir Jasper liked all this undisguised feminine homage. He liked to see the dark handsome head bent before him, while the jewelled hands arranged a footstool beneath his feet. He was an invalid, and any thing of this kind was permissible because he was an invalid.

"I shall never be more than a shade better as long as I live," he thought, as Mrs. Harding arranged his pillows; and once when Marcia was not looking, he bent his head over the busy fingers and touched them lightly with his lips.

This time the widow really did blush, and the blush was visible through the delicate simulated bloom.

"I shall be Lady Denison before I die," she thought, "if *she* knows nothing." Her eyes shot a furtive glance at Marcia, and her face darkened as she looked that way.

Marcia went back to her curate and her teachers and her children presently, and the Baronet and the widow were left alone. Mrs. Harding posed herself in an exquisite attitude—she had a charming selection of attitudes copied from the finest models in foreign galleries. She stood a few paces from Sir Jasper's chair, leaning half listlessly against one of the marble vases on the balustrade, with her elbow resting on the broad lip of the vase, her head supported by her hand, and her profile in full relief. She was at an age when a handsome woman's profile is apt to be handsomer than her full face.

There is no need to follow the conversation of these two. The widow had a talent for drifting pleasantly after her companion rather than for leading a conversation. Whatever Sir Jasper said seemed to interest her as profoundly as if by some coincidence he had happened to touch upon the one subject which most completely absorbed her own soul. By listening to him unweariedly she had learnt the trick of his very thoughts, and now and then happened to utter the words that were on his lips. Then how exquisitely her eyelids drooped over her beautiful eyes, and how delicious was the modest hesitation with which she murmured: "Strange that there should so often be such a coincidence of thought between us!"

The conversation had become half sentimental, half metaphysical; and Mrs. Harding was looking dreamily out across the flower-beds in the Italian garden, and the swelling green-sward of the park, when her face changed all of a sudden; and this time it was a dull deadly pallor which made itself visible under the artificial carnation. Looking listlessly at the sylvan landscape, she had suddenly become aware of the figure of a man on horseback, riding at a foot-pace by the side of the iron railings that divided the garden from the park, and bending, as he rode, to talk to one of Sir Jasper's men who was walking by his bridle.

Mrs. Harding had recovered herself by the time the horseman drew up at the little iron gate, and dismounted from his handsome chestnut hack.

"I really think I see a friend, or at any rate an acquaintance of mine, alighting at the gate yonder," exclaimed the widow. "Yes, it is Mr. Holroyde, quite an old acquaintance. He told me he was very likely to be visiting in this neighbourhood: but I did not think he would call; and I certainly did

not give him permission to do so. I trust you will not consider it an intrusion, dear Sir Jasper."

"Not at all," answered the Baronet rather stiffly. "It is only natural that Mrs. Harding's friends should be attracted to the spot where she is to be found. Is it any wonder if the foolish moths hover round so brilliant a flame?"

The widow made a coquettish little curtsy, the airiest gesture; just a graceful bend of the swan-like throat and a fluttering of the crisp muslin draperies.

"I don't think I ought to receive that pretty speech as a compliment," she said, "it sounded so like a sneer. If the flame were ever so brilliant, there would be little danger for Mr. Holroyde's wings. He is quite an old friend of my husband's."

"Humph!" thought Sir Jasper. "Then perhaps we may hear something of the antecedents at last."

The visitor was at the foot of the terrace-steps by this time, and Mrs. Harding went forward to receive him.

"I will leave you to welcome your friend," said Sir Jasper, turning towards the house; but the widow put out her hand with the prettiest gesture of half-timid entreaty.

"Oh, please stop, and let me introduce him to you," she said. "He has heard me talk so much of you; and I am sure it is to see you that he has come here."

Sir Jasper simpered, and pressed the pretty entreating hand.

"I shall be pleased to see any friend of yours," he said, "so long as he is not too dear a friend;" and in the next moment Sir Jasper Denison and Mr. Holroyde were saluting each other courteously, while the widow introduced them.

Of course there was the usual conventional small-talk. Mr. Holroyde was delighted with Roxborough, and still more delighted with Scarsdale. He had ridden over from Marchbrooke. Of course Sir Jasper knew Marchbrooke,—Colonel Deverill Slingsby's place,—and Deverill Slingsby himself, one of the nicest fellows in the world, and an old chum of Mr. Holroyde's.

"We were at Eton together," he said; "and when I went to the university he went to Woolwich. Since then the fellow has been in every quarter of the globe, and has done some very wonderful things, I believe. I remember seeing him at a ball at the French Embassy with his breast all a-blaze with decorations. But of late years the dear old boy has retired upon his laurels, and amused himself with farming at Marchbrooke, where I need scarcely tell you that his wheat costs him a hundred shillings a quarter, and his mutton two-and-sixpence a pound."

This mention of Colonel Slingsby placed Mr. Holroyde at once on an orthodox footing. The man who was received at

Marchbrooke might be pretty safely admitted at Scarsdale Deverill Slingsby was a bachelor, and had been something of a military mohawk in his fiery youth ; but he was supposed to be tolerably steady now ; and he came of one of the best old families in the county.

Sir Jasper had ample opportunity for a critical examination of Arthur Holroyde, as that gentleman stood opposite to him in the broad afternoon sunlight. Mrs. Harding's visitor was fifty years of age, and looked older than he was ; but he possessed all that elegance of figure and easy grace of manner which generally belong to a man who has lived forty years in good society, and has not been overtaken by the vulgar demon called fat—the arch enemy who can blight the patrician grace of a Prince Regent, and degrade that sublime personage into an object for a spiteful Brummel's sneer.

Arthur Holroyde was tall and pale and slim. No one had ever called him a handsome man. There were many people who had called him plain ; but Adonis would have envied the easy grace of his movements, Apollo might have fallen sick for very spite on beholding the airy lightness of his manner, Antinous might have committed suicide after contemplating his feet and hands.

His march through life had been one triumphal progress so far as the fair sex had been concerned. He was not a profligate ; but there are few profligates who have been so deeply steeped in baseness as Arthur Holroyde. He was a vain man ; and he would have sacrificed a universe to the gratification of his vanity.

"I am not handsome," he said, "and I am no longer young. There is a bald patch on the top of my head, and the obnoxious bird has trampled out my youth by planting impressions of his hateful feet at the corners of my eyes. I am pallid and wan, and sallow and faded. Let the handsome men beware of me. Let the young men tremble before my approach. My name is Arthur Holroyde, and I have never spared friend or enemy. *Væ victis!*"

Sir Jasper was not inclined to be altogether delighted with any friend of Mrs. Harding's ; but as Mr. Holroyde might possibly throw some accidental ray of light upon the utter darkness of the lady's antecedents, the wily Baronet decided upon encouraging him. He called to the groom, and ordered the handsome chestnut to be taken to the stables.

"You will dine with us, I hope, Mr. Holroyde. We are very quiet people ; but when Mrs. Harding honours us with her company we have at least one powerful attraction."

Arthur Holroyde bowed.

"I had intended returning to Marchbrooke before seven,"

he said ; " but as my friend gives me perfect liberty, and as he never waits dinner for any one, I will yield to the temptation you kindly offer me. I have heard a great deal of Scarsdale and of its master."

" I suppose that means that you'd like to see my pictures," answered the Baronet. " We get so many cockneys here who don't know anything about them, and who tramp past a Guido or a Sebastian del Piombo as coolly as if it were a signboard, that I am always very glad for them to be seen by any one who knows his Vasari.—Will you act as cicerone for your friend, Mrs. Harding? He will scarcely care to hear poor Browning's categorical descriptions or want to be told which pictures are ' considered very fine.'—We dine at seven, Mr. Holroyde ; and if you will give me half an hour before dinner, I think I shall have just light enough to show you some nice little bits of modern art in the rooms we inhabit."

This was a polite way of giving Mrs. Harding and her friend their freedom. The widow flung a pleading glance after Sir Jasper as he moved towards the window of his study ; but the Baronet was disposed for a nap, and resigned himself to the idea of leaving his charmer in the society of a possible rival.

" Why should I be afraid of rivalry?" he thought, as he settled himself in his luxurious chair, and closed his eyes lazily. " Don't I know that the widow wants to marry me, and has come here on purpose to marry me ; and that it is only a question as to whether I am prepared to make the sacrifice?"

As Sir Jasper disappeared from the terrace, the expression of pleading tenderness dropped away from Mrs. Harding's face, leaving her countenance as cold and hard as if it had been cut out of stone. It is a very common simile ; but the hard cold face was utterly stony in its sharply rigid outline and dull chalky pallor. The widow and her companion walked slowly away from the neighbourhood of Sir Jasper's open window in silence, until they had reached the further end of the terrace.

" Well!" said Mrs. Harding at last ; " what do you want with me? and why have you followed me here, where——"

" Where you have plans with which I may possibly interfere. My sweet—Blanche, I think it is, isn't it? how very awkward these changes of name are!—my dear Mrs. Harding, if you will only be reasonable I will do all in my power to assist your little feminine speculations instead of interfering with them. Do you value my power as a diplomatist so poorly that you will not trust me? My sweetest Blanche,—which is really a very pretty name, only a little too much *à la jeune meess* for so gorgeous a creature as yourself,—why not confide in me spontaneously, instead of placing me in the absurd atti-

tude of a gentlemanly detective, for ever following up accidental clues in my quest of you? I found the pretty little *poulet* you left for me at your lodgings, informing me that you would be absent a month or two at the latest, and would write to me directly you returned. My dear child, if I had been an importunate bootmaker you could scarcely have treated me with less confidence. Surely, my own Blanche, you cannot be so weak as to suppose there is any possible combination of circumstances under which you could escape me. As a matter of course, I guessed where you had gone; and as an equal matter of course I divined why you had gone there. My friend Deverill Slingsby, one of the most thorough-paced scoundrels and the best of fellows I ever had the happiness of knowing, has a *place* within twelve miles of this. I wrote to inform my friend that I should have the pleasure of shooting a few of his partridges, and I came down here the day before yesterday—devoted yesterday to the partridges; yesterday evening and until two o'clock this morning to my friend's society; and rode over here this afternoon. And now, dear old associate of my brighter days, let us talk seriously."

"You had better come and look at the pictures," said Mrs. Harding, in a voice that was as cold and hard as her gloomy face. She looked wonderfully like Gervoise Catheron this afternoon, and Gervoise in his worst mood. "You had better walk through the show rooms; Sir Jasper will expect you to know something about the pictures when you dine with him."

Mr. Holroyde assented with a graceful shrug of his shoulders and an airy flutter of his hands.

"I have done all the galleries in Europe and America," he said; "why shouldn't I do Searsdale? One infliction the more will scarcely annihilate me; but oh, fairest of cicerones, let us be quick about it."

The windows of the painted drawing-room were open, and Mrs. Harding entered the state apartments of the Abbey by one of them. There was that chilly atmosphere of emptiness which always seems to pervade chambers that are kept for show and not for use, however carefully they may be aired and warmed. Mr. Holroyde skipped lightly through the apartments, glancing here and there, and shrugging his shoulders at every thing.

"Hum, ah!—man drinking, the nose seen through the glass is very fine; sold at Christie's for eleven hundred guineas as a Murillo; I believe it's a Velasquez. Greuze!—no, my dear friend; not a genuine Greuze. I don't pretend to much in that way, but I think I know Greuze. Old man—bony and black and grim; Caravaggio. Why do people paint old bony black men? and why do other people give enormous sums for

them when they're painted? Perugino!—yes—'that's as may be,' as Tony Lumpkin observes. Saint tormented by Imps, by hell-fire Breughel. What a wonderful power of detail that fellow had! Vandyck! Ah, no gentleman's gallery is complete without an example of my courtly Anthony. And now, dearest Blanche, we'll rest ourselves on that quaint old window-seat and converse. I've taken a bird's-eye view of the collection, and I think I know how to talk to Sir Jasper. So let's be serious. A charming park, by the way. There seems to be some rustic festivity going on yonder under the trees. What is it?"

Mrs. Harding explained the nature of Miss Denison's fête.

"Miss Denison!" exclaimed Arthur Holroyde. "Oh, there is a Miss Denison, is there? Our friend the Baronet has daughters?"

"One daughter."

"Indeed! One daughter—and sons?"

"No, there is no son."

"Then the daughter is an heiress, I conclude."

"She is something more than an heiress, for she came into possession of a very handsome fortune left her by her mother when she came of age a year or two ago. And she will have another fortune from her father."

"And this place—is it entailed? Is there any obnoxious heir-at-law who can come and turn Miss Denison out of house and home when her papa dies?"

"I believe not."

"Humph!" muttered Mr. Holroyde; "Miss Denison is rather an eligible *parti*."

Mrs. Harding looked at him with a malicious smile. "I wonder whether you think yourself still invincible," she said with a sneer.

"I wonder whether I am still invincible," answered Mr. Holroyde coolly; "the man who wishes to conquer must start by thinking himself invincible. I think the first Napoleon's fortunes only turned when his remorseful fancies about poor Josephine inspired him with the idea that his star had deserted him. But let us be business-like, my dear Blanche. You want to know why I have followed you here. Unhappily the answer to that question is a very common one. Will you spare me by guessing it?"

"You want money," answered Mrs. Harding moodily.

"Don't say that *I* want money, my sweetest friend," replied Mr. Holroyde almost plaintively; "I never wanted money in my life. I look upon the vulgar coinage of the realm with utter disgust, as the source of all unpleasantness and the larger half of the crime of the universe. Do you think that of

my own accord I would come to you for so many sordid pounds and shillings, the mere weight of which would tear the linings of my pockets and destroy the set of my coats and waistcoats? But my creditors want money—the Jews want money; and finding myself pestered on every side I came to you as the wealthiest friend to whom I can appeal; and need I say that I came to you the more especially because you owe your wealth to a happy thought of mine, and that but for that happy inspiration you might be at this moment enjoying the noble hospitality of your country in some parochial establishment?”

“I wish to Heaven that you had never crossed my path!” cried the widow passionately. “I wish to Heaven I were a beggar in the streets, instead of the wretched slave I am!”

“Then go and be a beggar in the streets,” replied Mr. Holroyde in his airiest manner. “That’s such an absurd way of putting the thing, you know. When a man comes howling to me and says he wishes he was dead, I reply, ‘Then go and be dead, my dear friend. Your country will hold an inquest on you, but your country will not interfere with your liberty so far as to prevent your killing yourself.’ And when you, my foolish Blanche, talk absurd nonsense about being a wretched slave—a slave with fifteen hundred pounds per annum—how can I reply otherwise than I do? You wouldn’t like to take off that pretty muslin—trimmed with real Valenciennes I perceive—or that sweet thing in bonnets; you wouldn’t like to exchange Patterson’s boots for the conventional beggar-woman’s ragged sandals, or Sir Jasper Denison’s hospitality for the casual ward in Roxborough Union. My Blanche, above all things let us be sensible. You owe me every thing. I claim something. You received the half-yearly payment of your income a few weeks ago; never mind how I know it, since I do know it. I want three hundred and fifty pounds.”

Mrs. Harding shook her head.

“It is quite impossible,” she said. “I paid my milliner a very heavy account before I left London, and I owe a good deal to different people.”

“I am sorry to hear that you have been so extravagant. But I must have the three-fifty—that is to say, the Jews must have it.”

“I tell you again it is quite impossible,” answered the widow in a dogged manner that was quite foreign to Sir Jasper’s enchantress.

“And I deeply regret to be obliged to remark for the third time that I must have the money,” returned Mr. Holroyde presently. “Your own life has been happily so remarkably exempt from trouble, that you have no idea what importunate

fellows the Jews are. I can't say, by the way, that I have received any wonderful indulgence from the Christians; but when a man is down in the world, it's always a safe thing for him to fasten his difficulties upon the Jews. I suppose it's the old business of the scapegoat over again. But to return to those unpleasant *moutons* of ours: I really must have the three-fifty."

"But if I haven't got the money——"

"Oh, I think you will find the money. If you can't manage to oblige me just now, when you are living at free quarters here with our dear Sir Jasper, when are you likely to be able to oblige me? My dearest Blanche, don't let us be nonsensical. You know you must give me the money. Wouldn't it be much wiser to give it with a good grace?"

The widow's handsome head drooped on her breast in an attitude of sullen despair. So might the Clytemnestra of Æschylus have looked when she stood beside her victim's bath waiting till it should be time to throw the fatal net about that kingly form. But Mr. Holroyde was most serenely indifferent to dark looks. He wore a handsome cameo-ring on one of his tapering fingers, and he amused himself by taking it off that finger and trying it on the others, with the air of having only that moment discovered what a handsome ring it was, and what charming fingers they were.

"Yes," said Mrs. Harding, after a pause, "you are quite right, I must give you the money, and as much more as you choose to ask for. Of course you will take care not to make me too desperate, for then I might really throw off the mask, and tell Godfrey Pierrepont every thing, and go out into the streets to beg, or to die. You will keep the sword dangling above my miserable head, but you will take care the hair does not break. Have you ever read any stories about those wretched galley-slaves? I have. Now and then some desperate scoundrel escapes from Toulon. To do so is, I believe, something as nearly impossible as it very well can be; but there are men who do it. And then the creature goes back to Paris, where all his crimes have been committed, and the only place in which he can be happy; and he sets up some little low wine-shop—the White Rabbit, or the Red Mill, or something in that way—and is doing well, and has saved money, when one day an old comrade drops in and calls for his *choppe*, and recognises the landlord. You know what the comrade does, Mr. Holroyde. He talks about that 'gulf' of a place out yonder, and he is very friendly, and then on parting company he borrows a handful of francs, or a napoleon, as the case may be, and he goes away. But the White Rabbit has not seen the last of him. He comes again, and again, and again, and every time he

comes he must have drink and money. He sprawls about the benches, and he spills his wine upon the floor, and he smokes in the faces of the sober customers, and sings vile songs, and he must have money before he will go away. And he comes again, and again, and again, till the wretched runaway thinks it would be better to have the old torture of the iron upon his leg and the southern sun beating down upon his head once more. I think the French call that sort of thing *chantage*, don't they, Mr. Holroyde?"

"I don't know any thing about it, my dear Madam. I don't read third-rate French novels—horrible books, with smudgy engravings in the middle of the page, to say nothing of an inveterate limpness and a tendency to double-up suddenly, just as you are beginning to be interested. But, my dearest Blanche, the light is going; and if I am to do the civil to Sir Jasper Denison, I must go and look at his modern pictures. By the way, you will not forget that I want that three-fifty between this and nine o'clock. It happens fortunately that you have the feminine notion about bankers, and are in the habit of keeping your balance in the secret drawer of your dressing-case, or in your jewel-box, amongst those bracelets and brooches which represent the scalps of your victims. Between this and nine! Remember, I have a twelve mile ride before I sleep to-night."

Mr. Holroyde and his companion were walking through the long gallery as he said this. The widow paused with her hand on the green-baize door that communicated with the inhabited portion of the Abbey, and looked Arthur Holroyde full in the face with angry threatening eyes.

"I wonder you are not afraid that I may murder you," she said in a low voice.

"Do you? My dear child, you ought really to give me credit for more penetration. The last thing in the world I have to fear is any overt act of violence from you. You are too fond of yourself. The fellows who commit your revengeful murders are unhappy desperate devils whose lives are not worth a halfpenny to them. Your life is worth fifteen hundred a-year, and you are a handsome woman; and Sir Jasper Denison admires you; and there is a very pretty little game to be played yet with the cards you hold in your hand. No, dear Blanche, I am not afraid of you. If you could get any one else to murder me, it would be a different thing; but we don't live in romantic Italy in the age of the Borgias; and the hireling assassin with the infallible dagger is not available. What nice times those were, by-the-bye! Do you remember what the woodcutter said when he saw Cæsar Borgia throw his brother's corpse into the Tiber? 'I sha'n't put myself out

of the way about that,' said he; 'I see that sort of thing every day in the week.'

Mr. Holroyde found Sir Jasper basking before a cheerful fire in the yellow drawing-room, whither the visitor was conducted by Mrs. Harding, who was the Baronet's bright Circe once more, and no longer the haggard Clytemnestra of the picture-gallery. The September evening was cool; and the yellow drawing-room was rendered all the more agreeable by that cosy fire. Mr. Holroyde approached the hearth as gaily as if he had just concluded the pleasantest interview possible between devoted friends, and began to talk Allan Cunningham and Charles Blanc for the Baronet's edification; while Mrs. Harding retired to dress for dinner.

The light was not good enough for the inspection of Sir Jasper's Ettys; so the two gentlemen lounged over the fire, talking very pleasantly, until they were disturbed by the entrance of Marcia and the curate, who was to dine at the Abbey after the performance of his duty.

"The vans have just departed, papa," said Marcia; "and the children were singing the Evening Hymn as they rode away. I can't tell you what a happy day it has been to them, or how much I owe to Mr. Silbrook's untiring exertions."

Poor Mr. Silbrook had exposed himself to a meridian sun and a September wind until his face was too red to be susceptible of becoming any redder, or he would have been covered with blushes as he acknowledged this compliment. While he was responding to Miss Denison in a husky murmur, Sir Jasper interrupted him.

"Marcia," he said, "let me introduce you to a friend of Mrs. Harding's, who is good enough to dine with us. My daughter Marcia, Mr.—Mr.——"

"Holroyde," suggested the visitor.

"My daughter, Mr. Holroyde. Mr. Silbrook, my friend and neighbour, Mr. Hol—— Why, Marcia, what's the matter?"

She had turned suddenly away from the little group, and had sunk into the nearest chair. But she rose as her father spoke, and answered him quietly: "Nothing, papa. I am a little tired, and—I shall scarcely have time to dress."

She paused for a moment, looking steadily at Arthur Holroyde, as if she could not resist the impulse that prompted her to see what this man was like; and then she left the room very quietly, but so quickly that Mr. Silbrook, eager to open the door for her, plunged forward in the dusk and ran aground against a triangular ottoman.

Five minutes before the butler announced dinner, he was intruded upon in the sanctity of his pantry by breathless little

Dorothy, who entreated him to inform Sir Jasper as quietly as he could that Miss Denison was too tired to return to the drawing-room, and would take a cup of tea in her own room.

"Which I do not hold with, giving dinners to charity-children, and making the servants'-hall unbearable with the smell of roast-beef, and the housekeeper's-room as damp and sticky as a laundry with the steam of plum-puddings," remarked the stately butler to Dorothy Tursgood.

Mr Holroyde was considerably disappointed by the absence of the heiress; and a dull despair took possession of the curate when Sir Jasper coolly announced the fact of his daughter's fatigue. He had looked forward with such thrilling enjoyment to this banquet, to be shared with her. He ate his dinner without knowing what he was eating. The lights and the flowers and the glitter of silver and shimmer of fairy glass delighted him not. He dropped the ice in his soup, and spilt the salt in his wine; and the beautiful Marquise, in her wine-dark violet dress, was not there—not *his* marquise at least. Mrs. Harding occupied her old place on Sir Jasper's right hand, a little paler than usual, but with a languishing pensive air that charmed the Baronet; and she had contrived to dress herself to perfection in a *demi-toilette* of pale-grey silk relieved with delicate pink, and with one large half-shattered rose fastened amongst the luxuriance of her dark hair. It was a natural rose; as she talked to Sir Jasper the perfumed petals were scattered by a motion of her graceful head, and fluttered upon his shoulder in a little shower of sweetness. Perhaps the half-blown rose was what Balzac would have called a *mouche*.

Once in the course of the dinner there was a little pause in the conversation, and Mr. Holroyde rousing himself as if from a reverie, exclaimed: "Oh, by the way, I wonder what has won the Leger. I am not a 'horsey' man, and indeed don't take the faintest interest in that sort of thing; but however indifferent a man is, he is apt to find himself wondering at this time in the evening."

He said this with his most graceful carelessness of manner; and his indifference was quite genuine. He was *not* a horsey man; no man who cares to be a hero amongst women ever is; and as to the race—somebody would be ruined no doubt, and somebody else would win a heap of money, and there would be a general shuffling of the cards, but no possible gain therefrom for Mr. Arthur Holroyde. How was he to guess that on that northern race-course there had been another hazard above and beyond the ordinary prizes and the ordinary hazards of the meeting, and that a horse had run for no less a stake than the brilliant Arthur Holroyde's life—and had lost!

CHAPTER XXVII.

"AND I—WHAT I SEEM TO MY FRIEND, YOU SEE!"

THE telegram that reached Roxborough in the September evening brought despair to the hearts of Henry Adolphus Dobb and his most dangerous adviser. The news came almost as quickly as it could come to the tobaccoist's shop, where the two men sat pale and nervous, trying to look unconcerned, trying to carry matters with a high hand, and to smoke their cigars and talk lightly of general topics, but suffering a torture only second to that of the wretch who waits in the dock while a British jury deliberates upon his doom. A breathless boy came with the telegram. The tobaccoist was horsey, and went shares with a sporting neighbour in the expense of the message. There were a good many men in the shop, privileged customers, all waiting for the same intelligence, and all failing dismally in the attempt to assume an easy and indifferent bearing. They pressed round the tobaccoist as he tore open the envelope and read the message; but Dobb pushed fiercely through the little throng, and put his hand upon the man's shoulder, craning over him to look at the paper in his hand.

"Fly-by-night first, Heliogabalus second, Twopenny-Post-man a bad third."

And neither the lieutenant nor the clerk had backed the horse for a place: they had backed him to win! They had set their lives upon "this little chance," like Dr. Mackay's Salamandrine, and had lost.

Mr. Dobb's face was of a dull livid complexion as he rejoined his companion, a little way outside the eager circle round the tobaccoist. Gervoise Catheron had no need to ask any questions about the message; he could read the result of the race in the face of his friend. They went out into the street silently, and they had walked several yards before either spoke. They turned as if instinctively out of the bustling crowded High Street into that dismal little lane leading to the river, the dreary little lane in which Gervoise had walked with the brilliant widow some nine months before. Men in difficulty or despair seem to take to these dirty lanes and dark obscure alleys as naturally as a wild animal takes to his covert.

"This is a nice fix you've got me into!" the clerk said at last in a hoarse breathless manner.

"Don't say I've got you into it, Dobb, old fellow. Lord

"What I seem to my Friend."

knows I didn't make the horse lose," pleaded the lieutenant in whose tones there was some touch of fear. It is not pleasant for the tempter to encounter the reproaches of his victim. Surely once or so in the course of that dark life-drama Mephistopheles must have been ever so little afraid of Faust.

"No, but you told me he was safe to win," answered the clerk with a bitterness that was almost hysterical. "You talked and talked until you talked me into being a worse fool than yourself. Yes, and fifty times a worse fool, for what risk have you run in backing the horse? I've staked my name and character, and my house and home, and the bread I eat, upon him; and what did *you* stand to lose? What does a beggar lose when he gets his friend into a hole?"

"Come now, Dobb, I say, old fellow——"

"Gervoise Catheron," cried Henry Adolphus, turning upon his companion savagely, "how are you going to get me the money that I took out of the safe in our office? It must be put back there, every sixpence of it, before Saturday night. How are you going to get it?"

"Don't be violent, Dobb. I—I—*can't* talk about how I shall get it while you go on like that; but—I—*will* get it."

"You *shall* get it!" cried the clerk. "Yes, as sure as there's a heaven above us, you shall! I know your little game. You'll try to fool me in this matter as you've done in others. It will be 'to-morrow, Dobb;' and 'next week, Dobb;' and 'the week after next, Dobb.' That won't do this time. I'm telling you no lies; though, you're so accustomed to telling them yourself, I dare say you can't believe another man can tell the truth. I tell you that if I don't get that money between this and Saturday night, I shall be a disgraced man before Monday morning. You found out that old Sloper had gone to Rotterdam, did you? that was very clever of you; but you didn't take the trouble to find out when he was coming back. What does that matter to you? *You're* not his clerk. *You're* not responsible for the money that's been taken out of the safe. *You* won't be a beggar and a thief if the money isn't put back there. Old Sloper will be home on Saturday; and before he goes to bed on Saturday night, he'll have me in his private office and have the account of the cash collections out of me, down to the last halfpenny, and he'll bully if there's a halfpenny short. That's what I've got to look to, Mr. Catheron, and you must get me that money."

The brewer's-clerk trembled with excitement and passion. If he had been a prime-minister and his honour and position at stake, he could not have been more deeply moved. A hundred and twenty pounds a-year is not much in the abstract; but it

is a great deal when it represents the income which seven years or so of patient labour and very tolerable conduct have enabled a man to achieve. And though a brewer's-clerk's honour and good name may not be much in the history of the world, they are supremely important to the brewer's-clerk himself. Moreover, Henry Adolphus Dobb was a pompous little man, and had been wont to lord it over his circle. Disgrace to him would have been infinitely more bitter than to a humbler spirit.

"Don't I tell you that I'll get you the money?" said the lieutenant. "It's no good glaring at me like that, as if you were going to have a pound of my flesh and were eyeing me over to see where you'd take it. I can't coin the money, or pick it up out of the mud in this lane. You must give me time—reasonable time," added Mr. Catheron hastily: for the clerk made a kind of spring at him—he had heard that miserable phrase about the giving of time so often before. "I tell you I'm not going to drop you into any hole. Between this and Saturday you shall have the money—come what may. I—I think I know a quarter where I can get it: and it shall be got."

"You think you know a quarter!—what quarter? Why didn't you get money from that quarter before, when you told me you could not beg, borrow, or steal a five-pound note to bet upon that confounded horse."

"Never mind about that, Dobb. Perhaps I have had money from the quarter I speak of, and have been obliged to dispose of it to more pressing creditors than you, and haven't liked to tell you about it for fear you should turn disagreeable. Never mind where or how I get the money; I tell you it shall be got."

"Yes," answered the clerk, "I know your sneaking tricks. You'll be getting leave of absence, and you'll run up to London on pretence of looking for the money, and you'll stay away till after Saturday; and when you come back your friend Dobb—your tool and your catspaw—will be in Roxborough Gaol on a charge of embezzlement, and you'll snap your fingers at him outside his bars. And who'll believe him if he says that the fine gentleman tempted him to take the money? Not a living soul. I'll tell you what it is, Gervoise Catheron," cried Mr. Dobb, stopping suddenly and seizing his companion's coat-collar with no very gentle grasp, "I'm not going to leave you till you get me that money. If there's any quarter you can get it from, go there at once and I'll go with you; but I've been fooled once too often, and know what you are; and so help me Heaven, I won't part company from you till I've got that money!"

"Dobb, for mercy's sake be reasonable!"

"Yes, you'd be very reasonable if you stood in my shoes. Do you know what it is to have lived in a place, man and boy,

for seven-and-twenty years? No, you don't. Do you know what it is to have worked hard for every bit you've eaten and every drop you've drunk, and to be able to lay your hand upon your heart and say you don't owe any man a sixpence, and never wronged any man out of a farthing? Not you. Do you know what it is to live in a place where every one has known you and been friendly to you ever since you were a child, and knew your father before you and your grandfather before him, and knew 'em both for honest men? Not you, not a bit of it. It's natural to *you* to cheat. It's natural to *you* to have men pointing at you as the fellow that owes them money and will never pay it. It isn't in *you* to understand what disgrace is to such as me."

"Dobb," said Mr. Catheron, "if—if—I was circumstanced in any way but what I am, I should knock you down. I'm in your power, and you're free to insult me. I've got you into a hobble, I know; but if you'll have a little patience with me, I'll get you out of it."

"Between this and Saturday night, remember. The money won't be worth sixpence to me after Saturday night. I know what old Sloper is: there'll be no mercy there. Not an hour's grace, if I went down upon my knees for it."

"You shall have the money," answered the lieutenant with an air of conviction. But Mr. Dobb was not to be satisfied by any vague assurances of this kind. He had been too often beguiled by his friend's delusive promises. He insisted upon knowing what mysterious source the lieutenant relied upon, and little by little Mr. Catheron was induced to reveal the fact of his connection with Sir Jasper's fascinating visitor.

"She's a kind of relation," he admitted, as the clerk pressed him closer and closer. "And she has more money than she can know what to do with; but she's as mean as she can well be. However, when she knows my position is desperate, she'll shell out handsomely, I dare say."

"Oh, you dare say, do you?" cried the clerk ironically. "A deal of good your dare saying will do me on Saturday, when old Sloper hauls me over the coals in his private office, where the very chair he sits upon is made to turn on a pivot, in order that he may spin round suddenly at any moment and stare a fellow out of countenance with those old ferret's eyes of his. I tell you what it is, Mr. Catheron, I've a strong suspicion that the name of the lady you've been talking about is Mrs. Cock-and-a-bull, or Mrs. Harris, or Mrs. anybody that never had any existence; and that the whole story is an out-and-out crammer. But if you think I'm going to be made a fool of this time, my friend, you're very much mistaken. They may lock

me up in Roxborough Gaol after Saturday night ; but between this and then I'll stick to you like old boots."

Hereupon, of course, the lieutenant again protested. And after a great deal of protestation and argumentation, it was finally agreed that Mr. Catheron should write a letter demanding an immediate interview with the lady at the Abbey, and that the clerk should not only read this letter, but should with his own hands deliver it to Mrs. Harding. Not less than this would satisfy Mr. Dobb, and the lieutenant found that it was necessary to satisfy Mr. Dobb at any cost. The two young men went straight to Amanda Villas, where the face of Selina Dobb greeted them very wan and fretful of aspect. Henry Adolphus had been erratic in his habits lately, and Twopenny-Postman had made a considerable breach between the husband and wife.

"The teapot's as cold as a stone, and the kettle has been off the boil for the last hour," said Selina plaintively, as she followed her husband and his friend into the little parlour, where a sloppy teatray, a brown earthenware teapot, a jagged-looking quartern loaf in the last stage of staleness, and all those ragged cuttings of slate-coloured glazed lining, and balls of cotton and strips of whalebone and open papers of pins which belong to the process of dressmaking, adorned the table. But the clerk only muttered, "Oh, d—n! nobody wants your cat-lap!" as he pushed away the pins and glazed lining with a ruthless hand, and cleared a little space upon the oil-cloth table-cover.

"Catheron wants to write a letter," he said, "so look sharp with the pen and ink, 'Lina."

"I think Mr. Catheron might find it convenient to write his letters elsewhere, instead of making a rag of Miss Pennekit's new silk-dress," replied Mrs. Dobb stiffly.

She had just picked up a rustling silken garment which the two men had walked over. Her pale eyes had an angry look in them as she turned them upon the lieutenant. She had begun to understand that he was a dangerous friend for her husband, though she had no idea of the extent of the danger.

"Miss Pennekit and her dress may go to Bath!" exclaimed the clerk, with defiance in his tone. "Give us over the pen and ink, will you?"

Spoken to thus contumaciously, Mrs. Dobb performed her husband's behest with a dignified sulkiness, which is a wife's best armour. Of course she would have something to say to Mr. Dobb about this evening's behaviour; but what she had to say would keep, and would be all the better for keeping. Sir Emerson Tennent tells us that the crocodile is troubled with so weak a digestion that he will not eat his prey while it is fresh, but will hide it for some days, and devour it by-and-

by in a state of decomposition ; and in the same manner do some wives hide away their grievances, until the wrong grows rank with long keeping. Mrs. Dobb handed her lord and master a very smart china inkstand, with very little ink and a very execrable pen in it ; and then she gathered up Miss Pennekit's dress and its belongings, and withdrew. She thus asserted her position as an outraged matron, and had the best of Henry Adolphus. He had asked for pen and ink, and she had given him pen and ink ; but he had not asked her for paper, and she had not given him paper ; though she was perfectly aware that such a commodity was necessary to the production of a letter. It was rather a satisfaction to her to hear him opening little drawers and cupboards and using bad language in his search for what he wanted, as she settled herself to her work in the adjoining chamber.

Mr. Dobb found a few sheets of note-paper at last ; and Gervoise Catheron scrawled his brief epistle, with the clerk looking over his shoulder.

"MY DEAR BLANCHE,—I want to see you on particular business, and the first thing to-morrow morning, if possible. I don't want to come to the Abbey, as I daresay you wouldn't care to see me there. But I'll meet you in the wood ; say somewhere between the west gate and the Hermitage, and say eleven to-morrow morning, which will give you time to slip out after breakfast. Send me a line to say 'Yes' to this, or appoint your own time ; but let it be early to-morrow. I am in a desperate fix this time, and must have help somehow or other.—Yours always,

G. C.

"P.S. The bearer may be trusted."

The letter was folded and sealed under Mr. Dobb's eye. Indeed that gentleman watched the document with an air that implied his apprehension of possible legerdemain on the part of Gervoise with regard to this mysterious epistle. When he had put it in his own waistcoat-pocket, the clerk seemed a little more comfortable than he had been since the news of the Postman's defeat. But even then he was by no means quite easy in his mind. He put on his overcoat and hat, and bawled to his wife to the effect that he was going out again, and wouldn't be back for an hour or so ; and then looking very suspiciously at Mr. Catheron, he said :

"Come, you may as well go with me. It's a walk ; and you can walk that way as well as any other."

But the lieutenant pleaded some duty which would oblige his return to quarters ; and the clerk was fain to part com-

pany with him at the gates of Castleford Barracks very much against his will.

"He may get leave and be off to London, and sell me, for all I know," thought Mr. Dobb, as he made his way by back-slums and by-roads to Roxborough Bridge.

He walked so fast—in an involuntary hurry, which arose from hurry and tumult of his mind rather than any necessity for haste—that he was hot and breathless by the time he came to the bridge. He leaned against the stone balustrade to recover himself, and mopped his damp forehead with his pocket-handkerchief. As he stood bare-headed doing this, he looked down at the water flowing so quietly under the ponderous arch.

"If the worst came to the worst, *you're* pleasant and cool," muttered Mr. Dobb; "and I'd rather face you than the people who've known me ever since I was a child, and the fellows I've been cheeky to. They'd have it out of me with interest if I was in Roxborough Gaol for embezzlement; and there's not one of 'em would pity me or believe I'd been made a fool of. 'Downy Dobb' they've called me, and I've been proud of it; but I should find my downiness go against me if I was in trouble."

The chimnes of Roxborough Cathedral pealed the first quarter after eight as the clerk mused upon the bridge, and a little drizzling rain began to fall from a black starless sky. Through this rain, which got heavier every minute, Mr. Dobb walked to Scarsdale, and presented himself, a miserable object, at the servants' entrance. It was after nine o'clock by this time, and a hopelessly wet night.

"A case of cats and dogs," Mr. Dobb remarked, as he spun his hat upon his hand, making a kind of ornamental water-work for the edification of the man who admitted him. He was on familiar terms with all the Scarsdale servants; for the ale consumed at the Abbey was Sloper and Halliday's manufacture. There were malthouses and brewhouses that might have served for Sloper and Halliday themselves at the back of the Abbey, but Sir Jasper objected to the smell of brewing; and there had been no such thing as home-brewed October since the time of the last Baronet.

Mr. Catheron had enjoined his friend to convey his letter as quietly as possible to the lady for whom it was intended; so the clerk pretended that he had come to Scarsdale with a message from his wife to Dorothy. Little Dorothy was sent for while Mr. Dobb dried his wet garments before a blazing fire in the chief butler's own room, and sipped some steaming brandy-and-water prepared for him by the chief butler's own hand. She came, flushed and breathless; for as there was

only one person worth speaking of in her world, she had taken it for granted that the clerk had brought her tidings of her lover.

The chief butler laid down his newspaper and withdrew as Miss Tursgood entered the room. He was a most gentlemanly creature in a pompous way, and did the right thing upon all occasions.

"You'll find me in Mrs. Browning's room, if you'll step that way before you go, Dobb," he said politely. "In the mean time I beg you to consider this apartment at your own disposal."

"Is—is anything the matter with Gervoise?" cried Dorothy beseechingly, as the door closed upon the butler. She saw that Mr. Dobb's countenance was disturbed, and she looked at him with terrified appealing eyes, as if he held her fate in his hands. It does seem like this sometimes with regard to the messenger of trouble. It seems as if his voice were the voice of Fate, and as if it lay in his power to make our sorrow more or less.

"Oh Lord, no! there's nothing the matter with *him*, Doll," answered Mr. Dobb contemptuously, as if it were not in the nature of the lieutenant to have anything the matter with him; "but there's a precious deal the matter with me. However, that's neither here nor there; or, at any rate, it isn't here. You've got a lovely female residing under this roof by the name of Harding."

Even with the prospect of Roxborough Gaol looming darkly upon him in the dim future of Saturday night, Mr. Dobb's music-hall experiences compelled him to say "lovely female," where another man would have said "a lady."

"Yes, Henry Adolphus."

"Then what you've got to do is to give her this letter, on the quiet; and to bring me an answer, likewise on the quiet; and to be uncommon lively about it; for I have been cooking myself long enough before this fire; and shan't I get black looks from that precious cousin of yours when I get home!"

"But Mrs. Harding is sure to be in the drawing-room, and I don't know how I shall get to speak to her without every body knowing," answered Dorothy, taking the letter. "Why, it's from Gervoise!" she cried, as she recognised the weak illegible hand.

"Well, who said it wasn't?"

"But what does *he* want with Mrs. Harding?"

"Never you mind that. There's no occasion for the green-eyed monster to exhibit his obnoxious claws. It isn't a *love*-letter—I can tell you that, Miss Tursgood; and that's about

all I can tell you. So the sooner you make yourself scarce, and bring me back the answer, the better."

Dorothy was fain to accept her cousin's assurance. She was not so much jealous as mystified by the errand intrusted to her. Of course, if it had been a love-letter, it would not have been given her to deliver. And then Mrs. Harding was ever so much older than the lieutenant. Gervoise had dropped hints about his acquaintance with the brilliant widow; and that acquaintance had been put forward as the reason why Dorothy's engagement must be kept a secret from her kind mistress.

She made her way to the corridor, out of which the family apartments opened, and waited for the chance of communicating with Mrs. Harding. She had not to wait very long. A man came carrying coffee-cups on an antique salver. Dorothy asked him to tell Mrs. Harding that a person wished to speak to her; and five minutes afterwards the lady came out into the corridor.

"Well," she said, rather sharply; "what is it?"

"A letter, please, Ma'am; and I am to wait for an answer."

The widow took the missive, and tore open the envelope. Her face clouded as she looked at the address, and it grew darker as she read the letter. After reading it, she stood for a minute or so thinking; and there was such an absent look on her face, that Dorothy fancied she had forgotten all about the answer.

"Will you please to let me have the answer presently, Ma'am?" the little maid asked meekly.

"The answer is 'Yes'—nothing else. Who brought the letter, and how did it come into your hands?" asked the widow, looking at Dorothy with searching eyes.

"It was brought by my cousin, Ma'am; at least by my cousin's husband, who is a friend of Mr. Catheron's."

"A friend of Mr. Catheron's! You have got the name very pat, upon my word, Miss Tursgood; and pray do you know Mr. Catheron?"

The girl's face grew crimson as she answered, "I have met him at my cousin's, Ma'am."

It seemed such a hard thing not to be able to look straight into those scornful eyes, and say, "And I am to be his wife." But the dark shadow of secrecy already overhung Dorothy's life, and she endured this penalty as patiently as she would have endured heavier penalties for his sake.

She dropped a little curtsey, and tripped away. The widow looked after her with a malicious smile. But perhaps there was a little touch of envy underlying her scorn. Not to win half-a-million of money could Mrs. Harding's world-worn face

have glowed with those ingenuous blushes; not for the prize of an empire could her feet have tripped along the corridor with that elastic girlish step.

"I wonder whether it is nice to be young and fresh and silly like that," she thought. "I can't remember the time in which I did not know the world almost as well as I know it now. I have to thank my father for that—and for very little else."

She went back to the drawing-room, where Arthur Holroyde was making himself very agreeable to his host. The rain had begun a little before the time at which the visitor had asked for his horse; and as the night grew blacker and the weather more hopelessly bad, the hospitable Baronet had insisted on Mr. Holroyde remaining.

"Your friend will understand that a twelve-mile ride on such a night as this is an impossibility. I suppose you told him where you were coming?"

"Oh yes; Deverill knew I was coming to Scarsdale."

"Then he will naturally conclude you are stopping at Scarsdale. But if you think there is any likelihood of Colonel Slingsby's household being inconvenienced by your non-return, we can send a boy with a message. I don't suppose stable-boys have any objection to this kind of weather."

Mr. Holroyde protested that there was no occasion for the sending of any messenger.

"Dare-devil Deverill's servants—they used to give him that *sobriquet* in his mess—are too well accustomed to the erratic habits of their master. There will be no sitting up for me. There will be a door left unbarred somewhere in the back premises, and a candle on the hall-table, I dare say; but no further preparation for my coming. I don't think they ever do lock the doors at Marchbrooke, by-the-bye; but as Slingsby is a collector of bull-terriers, the burglars allow him to enjoy his old silver. He has been giving five-and-twenty shillings an ounce for candlesticks lately."

"A more civilised taste than I should have given him credit for," murmured Sir Jasper, toying complacently with a bonbon-box, which had, or had not, been given by Louis XIII. to Madame de Chevreuse.

So Mr. Holroyde stayed at the Abbey, and gratified Sir Jasper amazingly with his conversation; or perhaps still more so by the graceful manner in which he listened to Sir Jasper's discourse. He slept in the blue bed-room, in the bed by which Godfrey Pierrepont had lifted his soul to heaven in the passionate prayer of his blighted manhood. And yet no uncomfortable dreams haunted the placid slumbers of the elegant and easy-going Arthur Holroyde. It had been his habit to take life

lightly, and not to think too much of unpleasant things. He brushed the record of his sins and follies off his memory almost as easily as he brushed the dust from his coat in these latter days when he had no valet to do it for him.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

DIABOLICAL SUGGESTION.

MRS. HARDING entered the cozy little panelled chamber, which was used as a breakfast-room, very early on the morning after Mr. Holroyde's visit. But although the Abbey-clock had not yet struck eight, she found Arthur Holroyde standing in the bay-window, contemplating the woody landscape, beautiful in the sunlight of a delicious September morning. Men who lead actively wicked lives are generally early risers. It is only your passive, negatively bad man—your Charles Stuart, or your Rochester—who lie late o' mornings. Nero must be waking early when he has the burning of Rome to arrange for his evening festival; and Marie Marguerite d'Aubray, Marchioness of Brinvilliers, can have little leisure in which to oversleep herself. Arthur Holroyde's life had been a very active one, and the earliest glories of the eastern sunlight generally shone upon his waking eyes and found him busy planning the campaign of the day. He was the younger son of a younger son, and had never had any money of his own worth speaking of; yet he had lived, and had lived the sort of life which, in his estimation, was a very pleasant one. He had patronised the best tradesmen, and had been hunted by the best sheriff's-officers, and had taken flight to the pleasantest Continental cities, when the dark hour of insolvency came upon him. He had been outlawed, and had spent many years of his wicked existence in those foreign resting-places where Vice assumes her most graceful shape, and flaunts her brilliant image in the very face of poor humdrum Virtue. And he had contrived to enjoy himself very tolerably, living from hand to mouth, and picking up his money in all manner of crooked ways, but preserving the whiteness of his hands, the perfect symmetry of his slender feet, and the gracious sweetness of that smile which had been irresistible to weak womankind ever since the penniless undergraduate had left the university with an inevitable belief in his own powers, and a profound contempt for his fellow-men—a contempt which

he was wise enough to hide under the mask of good-nature. There is nothing more easy to acquire than a reputation for good-nature; and in running for the prize of popularity, the man who says agreeable things will always win the race against the man who only performs benevolent actions. The fortune of a millionaire will not allow the benevolent man to give every body as much as he asks for; but the pleasant-spoken man will make himself agreeable to the universe, and be none the poorer for the transaction, but in all probability very much the richer. All the substantial goodness of a Douglas Jerrold will not counterbalance one stinging witticism in the mind of the victim who has been stung. Mr. Holroyde had chosen his path in life at the outset, and had never swerved from it. For him Rochester's epitaph on his gracious sovereign might have been paraphrased. He was a man who never did a civil thing, and never said a rude one. He turned as the widow entered the room, and greeted her with his delightful smile.

"How nice this is!" he exclaimed; "I quite relied upon your being early this morning, and you have not disappointed me. I have been admiring the landscape. Upon my word, Burke's landed gentry have a great deal to be thankful for; and if it were not for the penalty they endure in having to pay their debts, would be fitting objects for a poor man's envy. How delicious nature is after rain—so fresh, so smiling, so elastic! I always fancy the effect of rain upon nature is rather like the influence of ready-money upon mankind—such a balmy, revivifying process, you know. And, by-the-bye, that brings me to what I don't care to talk about—that three hundred and fifty for the Jews."

Mrs. Harding took an envelope from her pocket and handed it to Arthur Holroyde. He crumpled the paper between his fingers, and listened smilingly to the little crackling noise produced by the operation.

"Yes," he exclaimed, "ready-money is unquestionably the dew which revives the parched and faded spirit. The grass is dry and withered, but the genial moisture descends, and the herb is green again. My sweetest Blanche, this is more than kind of you," murmured Mr. Holroyde, as he tore open the envelope; and so perfect was his expression of gratitude, that it seemed as if the money extorted from the moody-looking widow had been the free tribute of generous friendship. "I will not insult you by counting the notes," he said, as he transferred them to a dainty little pocket-book, fragrant with the odour peculiar to russia leather. "How much?"

"All I have in the world, except a few pounds to get me away from this place," answered Mrs. Harding with a gloom of manner which would have very much amazed Sir Jasper if

he could have beheld it: "three hundred pounds. I cannot give you a sixpence more. I couldn't if Godfrey Pierrepont were in the next room and you threatened to go straight to him and betray me."

"But I don't threaten any thing," replied Mr. Holroyde. "I never have threatened, and I cannot imagine any position arising in which I should find myself compelled to threaten. Why, even in that little parable of yours about the galley-slave, the runaway's old acquaintance does not threaten. The runaway is a good deal too wise to allow any thing of that kind to become necessary. He helps his old chum from time to time without grumbling, and his old chum is grateful. I am sorry you couldn't manage three-fifty; but the Jews must be satisfied with the three hundred—on account."

"Are you never afraid," asked Mrs. Harding, looking up at her companion with dark threatening eyes,—“are you never afraid that something may happen to you—on account of your wickedness?”

"No," answered Mr. Holroyde lightly; "all sorts of unpleasant things happen to me, but not on account of my wickedness; for I find still more unpleasant things happening to the most praiseworthy individuals. If there had been any adequate system of rewards and punishments in this life, and if a man could have insured himself a handsome income for his middle age by behaving decently in his youth, there should have been no better-conducted young man than myself. But I perceived at a very early age that the people who make the great fortunes are not the good people. As for myself, I have never gone out of my way to be wicked. A man must live, you know,—in his own opinion at least that is a primary necessity; and I have done the best I could for myself with regard to existence. As for punishment, I have begun to feel disagreeable twinges under my right shoulder, which one doctor attributes to cold, another to liver, and a third to debility; but I dare say Wilberforce had just the same sort of twinges after his fiftieth birthday, in spite of all those emancipated Negroes. And now, my dear Blanche, let us talk of more agreeable subjects. How long do you remain here?"

"I don't know."

"Blanche, of all qualities, there is none so charming as candour. Why do you refuse to be candid? Do you suppose that I am blind to your views, or that I disapprove your aspirations? Could not Lady Denison be as good a friend to me in the future as Blanche Harding has been in the past?"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't mean any thing just at present. It is you who mean to become Lady Denison; and upon my word I fancy

you have a very fair chance of succeeding if you play your cards with discretion."

"What would you say to my chances if Godfrey Pierrepont had returned to England?"

"Humph! I should say that he could not have chosen a more awkward time for his return. But has he returned?"

"He has, and is liable at any moment to come to this house. He is the Mr. Pouncefort whose name you heard Sir Jasper mention more than once last night."

"What! the eccentric individual who lived at the Hermitage? I ought to have recognised the Baronet's description of our Camberwell Don Quixote. There scarcely can be another man in the world who would make such a fool of himself. But where is my friend Pierrepont now?"

"They say he has gone abroad again; that he has gone back to his old African haunts; but he still retains the cottage he lived in, and I think it is doubtful whether he has really left England. Perhaps Miss Denison could tell us something about his movements."

"Miss Denison! My dear Blanche, you become more inscrutable every moment. Why Miss Denison?"

"Because he and she were very intimate—over head and ears in love with each other, as I believe."

"Incorrigible! Our Don Quixote in love again! I thought he had done enough of that sort of thing——"

He stopped suddenly, and his expression grew a little graver than usual.

"Yes, you are right," he said; "the mind has its twinges now and then, as well as the shoulder. The liver of a hard drinker will shrivel to the size of a walnut; but he still has a liver. I suppose the conscience of a man of the world is something like that. It gets very small, but there is a little bit of it left even at the last. If I were not too old and battered to be sorry for any thing, I should be sorry that I ever found my way to that cottage in the Camberwell lane."

He stood for some moments leaning against the mantel-piece, with his face shaded by his hand; but he was very quickly aroused from his reverie by the opening of the door and the entrance of Sir Jasper Denison, and in the next minute he was making himself delightful to the Baronet.

Miss Denison did not appear at the breakfast-table, and Mrs. Harding left the room immediately upon the conclusion of the meal to pay a little dutiful visit to Marcia's apartments; while Sir Jasper exhibited his modern pictures to his appreciative visitor.

The widow found Marcia very pale of aspect and very icy of manner, and left her, after making a few little conven-

tional speeches, completely mystified and by no means comfortable.

"Does she know any thing about Arthur Holroyde?" she wondered; "and is she purposely avoiding him?"

It was half-past ten when Mrs. Harding left Marcia. She went straight to her dressing-room and put on her hat and cloak. At eleven she was pacing the pathway between the west gate and the Hermitage, a path cut through the very heart of Scarsdale wood, darkened on one side by a steeply-sloping bank overgrown with brushwood, and bordered on the other by a wilderness of fern. The place was dark and gloomy even in the day, and as black as Erebus after nightfall. But the inhabitants of Scarsdale thought no more of plunging into it at ten o'clock on a moonless night than a cockney would think of walking down Cheapside.

Mrs. Harding paced the woodland pathway for about a quarter of an hour before the lieutenant made his appearance. He had never been in time for an appointment in his life, and he came to this flushed with running.

"I had the deuce of a bother to get here in any thing like time," he said. "It's very good of you to meet me, Beau-Blanche. I—I thought you'd turn up trumps if you knew a fellow's affairs were desperate."

"If you mean yourself when you say a 'fellow,' I never knew your affairs to be otherwise than desperate," said Mrs. Harding in her harshest voice—and her voice could be very harsh sometimes. "I'm afraid you won't be quite so enthusiastic about my coming when you hear that I have only come to say I can't afford you any assistance; and that it is utterly useless for you to pester me with letters, or attack me through the agency of your vulgar friends."

"I tell you what it is, Blanche," said the lieutenant with an air of resolution that was not at all usual to him, "it is a very serious matter with me this time, and I *must* have some money."

"Then you must get it elsewhere. You will get none from me, for I have none to give you."

"I don't believe you."

"You may believe me or not, as you please. You so rarely tell the truth yourself that it is only natural you should suspect me of a falsehood. All the money I possess amounts to exactly nine pounds sixteen shillings, and I shall want quite as much as that to get me creditably away from this place to my old lodgings, where I can live upon credit for a month or two."

"I don't believe you, Blanche," answered Gervoise Catherox, "I know you women can spend a heap of money upon your

flounces and furbelows ; but I can't believe you spend fifteen hundred a-year."

"I do not spend fifteen hundred a-year," replied Mrs. Harding moodily.

"What the deuce becomes of your money, then?"

"Suppose I have another pensioner more extortionate than you are!"

"What other pensioner?"

"Arthur Holroyde."

"Arthur Holroyde!" cried the lieutenant, growing very pale. "You don't mean that *he* takes your money from you—Godfrey Pierrepont's money?"

"I can mean it, and I do mean it."

"Good God!" exclaimed the lieutenant; "I did not think there was such meanness in the world. I don't set up for being a particularly honourable fellow; but I did not believe that any creature calling himself a man could be mean enough for that."

"Creatures calling themselves men can be mean enough for any thing, if it is to their own advantage to be so," answered Mrs. Harding coldly. She was in no humour to draw any nice distinctions between the conduct of the two men who wanted her money. They both tormented her, and between them they contrived to make her life very wretched. She was scarcely capable of considering any thing beyond that just now.

"Arthur Holroyde took three hundred pounds from me this morning," she said, after a pause, during which the lieutenant seemed to be so much absorbed by the consideration of Mr. Holroyde's meanness as to be for the moment forgetful of his own necessities; "and he left me with less than ten pounds."

"Caroline," said Gervoise Catheron presently, "or Blanche, if you like it better, I did not know that Arthur Holroyde was in England—I did not even know that he was alive; but I certainly thought that you and he had never met since you left Buenos Ayres, and that a meeting between him and you would be about the last thing likely to happen. That you should hold any communication with him now—that so much as one sixpence of Pierrepont's money should pass into his hands, shocks me more deeply than I can express."

"You talk like a fool!" exclaimed Mrs. Harding impatiently. "Do you suppose *I* sought out Mr. Holroyde, or that I ever wished to see his false face again? I met him accidentally at Baden when I was there with—my sister, and I met him again at Naples, just before my sister died; since then I have done my utmost to avoid him, and have descended even to stratagem in my desire to escape from him; but he has

hunted me from place to place, and now he has hunted me out here."

"But why do you give him your money?"

"Why do *you* torment me with senseless questions?" cried Blanche Harding, passionately. "Can't you guess why I accede time after time to his extortionate demands? Do you suppose I want the history of my life blazoned wherever I go? and do you suppose he would refrain from the telling of it, if I did not pay him to hold his tongue? I am here under a feigned name, respected, caressed, almost the mistress of this place. He knows that here, above all places, there would be ruin for me in a few words from him. That is why he asks me for money, and that is why I give it to him."

"He ought to be shot like a dog!" gasped the lieutenant. "I should think the man committed no sin who shot that scoundrel as he would shoot a mad dog."

"If I had a brother who cared for me, Arthur Holroyde might be in some danger," answered Mrs. Harding; "but as it is——"

"If you had a brother who cared for you!" repeated Ger-voise, with some touch of feeling in his tone. "As if you didn't know that I care for you—as much as an unfortunate devil like me can care for any thing or any body. Good God!" exclaimed the lieutenant, carried away by a sudden passion of remorse that was very foreign to the listless indifference of his ordinary manner, "what a miserable set of wretches we Catherons have been from first to last, and what a despicable life we have all led! Why, the very first person I remember in the way of a stranger was a sheriff's-officer, and I think he gave me sixpence, and that I liked him, and wondered why my father swore at him and abused him. What a childhood we had! What a youth! hustled out of one lodging and hurried into another; leaving every place in debt, and living under feigned names in obscure neighbourhoods, where people believed in us and trusted us, until we went away, stealing our own luggage, bit by bit, under cover of dark nights. Why, Fra Diavolo and Dick Turpin were splendid fellows compared to us. Cartouche and Jack Sheppard were not so base as we were, for they risked their lives. Do you remember the King's Bench, and the Lord Chasingsteeple who was such a great man there in our time? Upon my word, I thought that he was a great creature, and the only nobleman in the world. Do you remember the snug little dinners my father used to give in his rooms in the state-house while his creditors were cursing him outside? Do you remember that man who used to come round at eight o'clock with a basket and a bell, and some cry about the corned beef and legs of mutton? That was the only curfew I ever heard when I

was a child. Is it any wonder that I grew up a scamp? Is it any wonder that nothing but shame and misery has ever come out of the lives of any of us? The first lesson we ever learnt was to tell lies to tradespeople, and to look as if we were telling the truth; and is it any wonder that we grew up vile and false? Do you remember that story about papa expecting remittances from the North? I suppose it had a meaning once, and that my father really had property in the North; but I know we repeated it to people long after it had ceased to be any thing but a shameless lie. And all our meannesses and lies and petty miseries arose from the want of a little money. Good Heavens! when I remember all this I am inclined to believe that the most wretched creature upon earth is the man who has been brought up as a gentleman, and has no money to keep his useless empty life honestly in his body. If I ever marry and have sons—and Heaven knows the poor devils would be very much to be pitied for having such a father—I would apprentice them to blacksmiths or carpenters; they should sit cross-legged upon boards and stitch other people's garments; or burrow in preposterous boxes at the corners of streets and cobble other people's boots; they should climb up ladders and light lamps; they should walk twenty miles a-day and deliver letters; they should do the vilest, dirtiest, commonest work that has to be done in the world, rather than they should call themselves gentlemen, and live upon other people's money, and talk about Edward the Confessor."

The lieutenant's passionate tirade might as well have been a soliloquy for any effect which it produced upon his companion. That lady had a great deal to think of just now, and could not afford to give her attention to the feelings or opinions of an importunate brother, who only wrote to her or came to her when he wanted money. She was thinking of what he had said about Arthur Holroyde: "Such a man ought to be shot like a dog!"

"I wish some one would shoot him. I wish some poacher could know of the money he carries about him, and would lie in wait for him and murder him as he rides through the wood. He was right when he said that there are no assassins to be hired in these days; if there were, his life would not be very safe."

This was what Mrs. Harding was thinking as she walked by her brother's side. A prowling man in corduroy went by her presently; a man with a swarthy visage and a bull-neck, encircled by a bird's-eye handkerchief which in itself would have been evidence against him, so murderous was the noose-like knot that fastened it.

"You are very ugly and very dirty," thought Mrs. Harding

as she looked at the prowling man; "but ugly and dirty as you are, I would kiss you if I thought you would stop Arthur Holroyde on his way home to-night."

"Come, Blanche," said Gervoise presently, "for mercy's sake, have a little compassion upon me. I don't think there ever was a fellow in such a fix as I am in just now. Is it really true that you are without money?"

"It is as true and as real as the ground we are walking upon."

"Can you get it for me? I want fifty pounds; and if I don't get it, I shall be ruined, and another man who lent me money which was not his own will have to go to prison. I can't look that man in the face till I've got the money. Will you borrow it for me from Sir Jasper?"

"Not to save your life!" answered Blanche Harding resolutely. "I gave Arthur Holroyde three hundred pounds this morning in order that I might keep my position in Scarsdale Abbey. I am not such a besotted fool as to lose it by trying to borrow money of Sir Jasper; and he is the last man upon earth to lend it, if I were mad enough to ask him."

"There's Miss Denison! can't you ask Miss Denison?" gasped Gervoise hoarsely. He was in such utter need, so miserable, and so desperate, that he felt as if he could turn upon his sister and strangle her, if she persisted in refusing to help him.

"Miss Denison hates me, and would not give me sixpence to save me from starving," returned Mrs. Harding, who in her estimate of Marcia's feelings in such a hypothetical case may have been influenced by a knowledge of what would have been her own.

"I tell you again, that I *must* have the money!" her brother reiterated in a hoarse whisper.

"Then you must find it for yourself. I tell *you* again, that I have given my money to Arthur Holroyde. I gave it him a few hours ago—three hundred pounds in Bank-of-England notes. Ask him to give you some of it, if you like. He is an old friend of your father's; and you know what he is, and what chance you have of getting the money you want from him."

"I do," answered the lieutenant bitterly. And then, after a little, he said in a quite different tone, "Three hundred pounds! Bank-notes for three-hundred! And fifty would save me and another man from ruin! Good Heavens! and if I go back to Roxborough, I shall have that fellow Dobb howling and snivelling about me every minute of my life. Caroline!"—he called his sister by the more familiar name when he was most excited,—"*Caroline!* if I don't get the money before to-

night, I shall shoot myself between this and to-morrow morning."

"Before you do that, you had better try your chance with Arthur Holroyde. He might give you the money."

Gervoise Catheron turned upon his sister, deadly pale and with his lips twitching convulsively. "What do you mean by that?" he asked in the suppressed tone to which his voice had sunk as his passion intensified.

"I mean only what I say. To shoot yourself would be very horrible, and it is the last thing you can do. I had half made up my mind to drown myself once at Naples, when something happened to prevent my doing it. Perhaps it would have been just as well for me if I had quite made up my mind. You may as well appeal to Arthur Holroyde before you blow out your brains. You can't do it afterwards."

Though it was Mrs. Harding's habit to look boldly into people's faces with her dark flashing eyes, she turned her head a little aside just now as she talked to her brother, and looked gloomily into the shadowy depths of fern and underwood. Philosopher and optimist though Sir Jasper was, he would scarcely have contemplated taking Blanche Harding for his wife if he could have seen her countenance at that moment.

"Why do you harp upon Arthur Holroyde and the money you have given him?" asked the lieutenant. "You know as well as I do that the man who would extort money from a woman—and above all women in the world from you—is just the last man upon earth to surrender a shilling of that money to help a poor devil out of his difficulties. You *must* remember that I always hated Holroyde—that he was insolent to me when I was a boy; and when he hung about us, pretending to be my father's friend, and ensnaring you into an acquaintance so fatal to you since that time that the worst death which could have overtaken you in those early days would have been a blessed intervention of Heaven. He was insolent to me then, and savage in his way—for some men have a tigerish kind of politeness that is more savage than another man's brutality. He hated me, because I knew too much about his acquaintance with you, and the letters that passed between you unknown to my father; and I hated him and gave him back his insolence—Heaven knows why, perhaps because I had an instinctive knowledge that he was to be your most fatal enemy. You think because I am a scamp, and have led a scamp's life, that I am not to feel these things—that I am to have neither memory nor conscience. I tell you, Caroline, that I would not take a shilling from that man as a gift, or as a loan even, to save me from the position I am in to-day. If I could grapple with him face to face, and take the money from him

by sheer force, and then defy him to get it back from me or to bring his baseness to the light of day by proclaiming how and of what he had been robbed, I would do it without hesitation. If I could get the money I want by begging in the highway, I would stand barefoot in the mud and beg; but I will not cringe to Arthur Holroyde. If there is some lingering spark of manhood involved in this determination, it is the last spark of manhood that is left in me, and it will only expire when I die."

Mrs. Harding made no response to this last part of her brother's speech. She cared so little about what he felt, or what he thought, that it is doubtful whether she ever heard any thing that he said relating to himself alone. One black and hideous thought absorbed her powers of thinking—one dark and horrible image filled her imagination: one chance of escape from the most miserable and degraded slavery that ever held a woman in bondage had flashed upon her mind within the last quarter of an hour. She had tried to put away the dreadful thought that there was such a chance of escape; she had tried to shut the horrible image out of her brain. But once evoked, the phantom was not to be exorcised; it loomed upon her, a shadowy monster, like the ghost of Frankenstein's gigantic tormentor, and darkened all the universe with the blackness of its spectral form.

"Arthur Holroyde is not worth a fair fight," she said, answering one particular sentence in her brother's speech. "He is only fit for what you talked about just now: he ought to be shot as you would shoot a dog. However, we won't talk of him any more; he has taken my three hundred pounds, and he is happy. His smooth tongue has ingratiated him with Sir Jasper, and he dines here to-day. He has his horse with him; a fine showy chestnut, bought with my money, I dare say; and I suppose after dinner he will ride home with his plunder."

"What do you mean by home? where is his home?"

"He is staying at Marchbrooke with a Colonel Slingsby."

"Caroline," said the lieutenant, laying his hand suddenly on his sister's shoulder, and planting her upon the spot where she stood, "I tell you for the last time that I am very desperate. Have you no jewels that you can dispose of? no friend you can appeal to? no possible means of getting me fifty pounds between this and Saturday night?"

"None," answered Mrs. Harding. "If you want the money, you must get it for yourself."

She said this as if there were some means of obtaining money available to her brother—some means known to her and to him, though not spoken of by either.

"God help you, Caroline, if any crime comes of your re-

fusal!" cried Gervoise, as he released her, so roughly that she staggered away from him for two or three paces before she recovered herself. He had tried to see her face as he made his last appeal to her, but she had persistently averted it. He walked away now with no word of farewell, and made his way in hot haste back to Roxborough.

He had certain duties to do in the course of the day, and he struggled through them somehow or other. At half-past five he went to the street in which the offices of Sloper and Halliday were situated, and loitered up and down the pavement smoking a cigar, and looking dismally every now and then towards the window of Mr. Dobb's apartment.

He had come to that street with the intention of seeing the brewer's-clerk, whose day's work always ended at six o'clock. But as the clock struck six Mr. Catheron threw away the end of his cigar and turned the corner of a narrow lane leading towards the open country. If a sheriff's-officer had been pursuing him, he could scarcely have walked faster than he did. He only stopped at last from sheer exhaustion. And when he did come to a standstill, he looked about him like a man who for the first time discovers which direction his steps have taken. He found himself in a flat swampy meadow on the bank of the Merdrid. There were cattle standing a few paces from him, staring at him with big stupid eyes, and straight before him, upon the low line of the western horizon, the sun was going down in a sea of blood.

"I couldn't face that fellow," muttered Gervoise Catheron; "I know I'm the meanest coward that ever trod this miserable earth; but I couldn't face him—I couldn't stand any more of his howling."

He stood so long in the same attitude staring at the darkening water that the staring cattle grew tired of watching him, or perhaps mistook him for some inanimate object looming darkly above the low swampy shore, and dropped their heavy heads to resume the slow munching of their evening meal. After standing thus for some ten or fifteen minutes, Gervoise Catheron turned suddenly and ran across the meadow on his way back to Castleford. He ran nearly all the way, entered the barracks unobserved, and went straight to his room. He locked his door before he went to a little table, on which there stood a mahogany pistol-case—not his own, or it would have been pawned, but left in his custody by a youngster in the regiment. The lieutenant unlocked this case, took out one of the pistols, examined the loading by touch rather than by sight, for the room was almost dark, and then dropped it carefully into his pocket.

He made his way out of the barracks, for the officers were

at mess. He heard their loud voices and the jingling of glass and silver as he went by the room where they were assembled, and thought—Heaven knows how bitterly—what a pleasant friendly gathering it was, and how happy the man must be who could join that cheery circle with a light heart and an untroubled conscience.

He went out of the gas-lighted passages into the gloomy dusk of the gathering night. As he crossed the barrack-yard he looked up to the quarter where the moon would have been, had there been any moon that night.

Oh, God of heaven, had it come to this!—that it should be to his interest for the earth to be hidden in darkness—the darkness that could not cover him from the eye of his God, but might shroud his doings from the sight of his fellow-men!



CHAPTER XXIX.

"J'AI DU T'AIMER, JE DOIS TE FUIR!"

MARCIA DENISON remained in her own apartments throughout that day on which Mr. Holroyde made himself agreeable to Sir Jasper. That this man should be her father's guest—that he should exist for four-and-twenty hours under the same roof that sheltered her, filled her mind with a passionate indignation, against which she struggled in vain. Arthur Holroyde—the man whose baseness had blighted a good man's existence—the man whom Godfrey Pierrepont had followed across the Atlantic, and tracked from city to city, from state to state, and who had yet gone scatheless, and now, after fifteen years, still lived, and still held his head erect before the face of his fellow-men, and dared to intrude himself upon honest people!

And this man came to the Abbey in the character of Mrs Harding's friend. All Marcia's prejudices against the woman whom she had tried in vain to tolerate were intensified by the coming of Arthur Holroyde.

"Can I forget what Godfrey Pierrepont's friend told him about this man?—that the slightest association with his name was death to a woman's reputation. And yet Mrs. Harding is so intimate with him that he comes here to visit her, and remains here as her friend."

Until now Marcia Denison had intended to stand aside, passive and uncomplaining, while her father allied himself to this woman, if it should please him to take her for his wife.

"Why should I interfere with his happiness?" she had thought; "I suppose he can only be happy in his own way, however strange or perilous the way may seem to me. I shall only have to seek another home; and my father's house has never been so much a home to me that I need feel the change very deeply."

It is not to be supposed that any set of people so far-seeing as the Baronet's servants could remain blind to their master's infatuation. The state of Sir Jasper's affections had been freely discussed in the servants'-hall; and odds had been taken in the stables as to whether Mrs. Harding would become Lady Denison—or, in the *patois* of the groom species, whether the middle-aged filly would pull off the stakes. The general opinion of the household was, that the widow would prove a winner. This idea was by no means entirely pleasant; for the eye of a master, however penetrating, is purblind as compared to the eye of a mistress.

Mrs. Harding had been lavish in her donations to the Scarsdale servants; perhaps not altogether without some ulterior purpose.

"She's a deep one," said the chieftainess of the Abbey housemaids as she pocketed the widow's donation; "and she knows it's as well to be friends with such as me, for I could tell something about that beautiful complexion of hers, and the pink marks she leaves on the towels."

Mrs. Browning sighed plaintively as she contemplated the handsome silk dress which Sir Jasper's visitor had brought her from London. "It was very liberal of her," she murmured, "and quite the lady to make it a dress instead of money; but the Abbey won't be the Abbey, to my mind, if ever she comes to be mistress of it."

Dorothy ventured to give her mistress some hint of what was talked of in the housekeeper's room, where Dorothy took her tea with Mrs. Browning, Sir Jasper's own man, and the butler, and sometimes, by special invitation, the chieftainess of the housemaids.

"Papa is the best judge of whom he pleases to marry," Marcia had said quietly. "You must always remember that, Dorothy, when you hear him spoken of. Of course, I am not so foolish as to think that he is not spoken of by his servants, or so proud as to dispute their right to talk of him, so long as they speak of him with the respect and friendliness of spirit that servants ought to feel for a good master. I know that there is nothing settled between papa and Mrs. Harding.

admires her very much, but he has admired other people, and nothing has come of his admiration. However, it is just possible he may ask her to marry him."

"And I'm sure she would, Miss Marcia;" gasped the impetuous Dorothy.

"In that case I should leave Scarsdale, and have a house of my own at Brighton—or Bath or Leamington—or Cheltenham—or some old maid's paradise of that kind. And you should go with me, Dorothy, and by-and-by, when you married, your husband should be my butler; and I would give him the largest salary that ever an old-maid's butler had in this world, for my little favourite's sake."

Dorothy blushed crimson as she thought of Gervoise Catheron, and the impracticability of her kind mistress's scheme.

"He might be better off if he were a butler," she thought pensively, "and could have money to bet upon those dreadful horses, or would have nothing to do with them, perhaps, if he had plenty of money without betting. I'm sure there can't be any pleasure in going on as he and Henry Adolphus go on about weight-for-ages, and platers, and Lord Edinbro, and Mr. Cheerful."

Dorothy brought her mistress some luncheon at two o'clock, and some strong tea at five. Marcia had no appetite; and the fiction of her not being well enough to dine with the family was supported by this fact. She sat alone reading throughout the day, too much disturbed to endure even Dorothy's society for any length of time.

She read until her head ached and her eyes grew dim and heavy. She felt that sense of weariness and oppression which a long day spent indoors is apt to produce in any one who is accustomed to be a good deal in the open air.

When the first dinner-bell rang, and Marcia knew that Mrs. Harding would be absorbed in the mysteries of her toilette, she left her room and went by a labyrinth of passages to the back staircase, at the foot of which there was a dark lobby that opened into her own garden—the dear old-fashioned garden sheltered by high walls, and almost forgotten by every one except herself and the gardener who attended to it. The evening air blew freshly upon her as she emerged from the dark lobby, and the perfume of the early autumn flowers made the air odorous.

She had never entered this garden since the first days of her intimacy with Godfrey Pierrepont without thinking of him, and that deserted garden in Yorkshire, which he had spoken of so regretfully. She was familiar with his story now, and could conjure up the vision of that other garden,

and the figures that had once given it life and brightness. She saw the young mother bending over her toddling boy, and proud of his first ambitious footsteps. She saw the happy, innocent rustic home, the sweet Arcadian existence unspoiled by wealth, untrammelled by the duties of society. "And it is all so long ago," she thought. "When I remember the years that have passed away since that time, it seems as if nothing so long gone by could have been real. It seems as if it was only a dream that I have been told."

And then she thought of Godfrey Pierrepont as he was now—the desolate, ruined man; ruined far more completely than the man who has lost only lands and wealth, for those may be won twice in a lifetime; ruined by the destruction of a home—that sacred temple which, once shattered, can so rarely be built a second time. She thought of him, and wondered what his life had been since that solemn hour after the thunder-storm, when the sun had shone upon them standing side by side for the last time as he bade her farewell.

"He hailed that sudden sunburst as a good omen," she thought sadly; "as if there could be any good for us two upon this earth. When will another sun shine upon me and him standing side by side?"

She had been walking slowly along the smooth gravelled pathway between two prim hedges of box—hedges that can only be found in gardens that have seen more than one centenary; she had been walking with her head bent despondently; but at this moment she looked up suddenly, startled by a footfall on the gravel, and found herself face to face with Godfrey Pierrepont in the autumn dusk.

That he should be there at all was very wonderful to her; but there was nothing wonderful in the fact that he appeared before her at the very moment when his image occupied the chief place in her mind. Did not his image always reign supreme in her thoughts, shutting out all meaner things?

She grew very pale as she looked at him, moved unspeakably by the deep joy which his presence brought her. To see him once more, to touch his hand, to hear his voice—she would have given years of her dull empty life for so dear a privilege.

"I thought you had left England," she said. It was a very commonplace remark; but deep feeling generally shelters itself under commonplace phraseology.

"I have left England, and have come back. Oh, my dear love, I wanted to see you once more—for five minutes—only to say good-bye. We seemed to part so abruptly, that day after the storm. I was at St. Petersburg a week ago. I have

come all the way from the banks of the Neva to bid you good-bye."

It must be confessed that Cupid in partnership with Plutus is a more powerful deity than the same god unaided and alone. Eros without the command of ready-money is the divinity without his pinions; but Eros the millionaire has an eagle's wings on his shoulders and Aladdin's lamp in his hand. Marcia Denison was weak enough to be touched to the very heart by the thought that this battered wanderer had come all the way from Russia to be five minutes in her presence. This was indeed such love as she had never hoped to win. And yet he might have loved her quite as dearly and have been powerless to communicate with her by any more romantic medium than the post. A little desperation goes a long way with a woman; and a wild midnight journey through Russian snows will sometimes produce a stronger effect upon a feminine heart than half a lifetime of patient devotion. The Derbys and Legers of love are very apt to be won by a fluke.

For a few moments Marcia stood face to face with the man who loved her—the man whom she dared not think of in the character of a lover. For a few moments she lost her self-command, so sweet was the knowledge that she was dear to him, so exquisite was the happiness she derived from his presence; and then she looked up at him with reproach in her sad earnest face.

"I am so sorry you should have come back," she said; "it was so wrong of you to return."

"I was mad and wicked, my own dear love. Ah, let me run riot in wickedness. I have only come back to you for five minutes. Take out your watch, Marcia; give me a quarter of an hour, and when the hand points to the quarter send me away. I will submit myself to you as meekly as a child."

Marcia did not look at her watch, but she was quite resolved to dismiss Mr. Pierrepont in a quarter of an hour—perhaps to allow him even less grace.

She thought that he must have something special to say to her—some communication to make that might in a measure redeem the folly of his journey; but he walked by her side in silence. It seemed as if to be near her was in itself a reward for all the fatigue of his mad scamper across civilised Europe.

"Marcia," said Godfrey Pierrepont, "you must think me mad for having come back to you like this. You will have better reason for such a conclusion when I tell you why I have returned. Do you believe in dreams, Marcia? I have shut my mind against all belief in them, though on remembering the shadows of the night, I have often been tempted to perceive

a prophetic significance interwoven with their obscurity. But since I left this place my sleep has been haunted by your image, until my waking became unendurable. Night after night, night after night I have seen you; and amid all the foolish confusion of my dreams that one image has appeared distinct and unchangeable—always beckoning, always entreating my return. Ah, Marcia, I know the image was only a lying shadow. The demons of mediæval superstition were wont to take the fair form of a Christian knight's own true love when they wanted to lure him to his ruin; and his fortitude underwent a terrible trial before he could bring himself to lift his ponderous sword and smite the cherished image wherein the foul fiend had sheltered himself. I tried to remember this, Marcia; I tried to remember that the vision of my dreams had no relation to your real self. While I saw you pale and tearful, supplicating me with shadowy outstretched arms, you were tranquil and happy perhaps, with no more constant prayer upon your lips than that which besought forgetfulness of me and of my folly."

"No, Godfrey, not happy; tranquil, perhaps, but never happy."

It was the first time that she had called him by his own name. He turned to her suddenly; her eyes had grown accustomed to the autumn dusk, and she saw his face distinctly, and knew how deeply her pronunciation of that name had affected him.

"No one has called me by my name since my mother put her arms round my neck as she wished me good-bye in the garden at Pierrepont," he said in a low voice. "I have nothing more to tell you, Marcia, now I have told the foolish cause of my return. I went further and further northwards, for I had a fancy for exploring the steppes of Russia, and following the footsteps of Muscovite civilisation to the confines of China. There is a new world for me out yonder—and I shall not return to Europe till I know Central Asia as well as I know the shores of the Niger and the Nile. I travelled very slowly when I left England after that sad day in which we parted; it seemed so hard to go further and further away from you; so I lingered here and loitered there, dawdling and dreaming by day and night, and in every stage of my journey doing battle afresh with the tempter, who urged me to come back to you, if only to see your face—if only to touch your hand once more in my weary life. I had reached St. Petersburg when my courage failed. To such a hardened traveller as I am the journey from one end of Europe to the other was scarcely worth consideration. One day when my dreams of the preceding night had been more vivid than usual, I was seized with a feverish unrest.

I had made all the arrangements for the Asiatic expedition, and was waiting in dreary idleness for favourable weather for my start. Better, I thought, to spend that weary interval in a hurried flight hitherward. I have returned in secret, leaving my servant behind me; and no one but you and the old woman at the Hermitage will know of my coming. I arrived in the early morning, and have lain in wait for the dusk ever since, trusting to some happy accident to afford me an opportunity of seeing you. I knew this garden was your favourite walk in the twilight, and I had been in ambush behind the yews for half-an-hour before I heard the dear familiar footstep and the rustling of the silken dress."

While he was speaking, the thought of Arthur Holroyde's presence at Scarsdale had flashed upon Marcia. Until then she had forgotten every thing in the surprise and agitation that had come upon her. But now all at once she understood the danger that might arise from any meeting between Holroyde and the man he had injured. Would Godfrey, who had sought his wife's betrayer from one end of America to the other, be satisfied to let him go scatheless if Providence flung them together? An icy terror benumbed Marcia Denison's heart.

"Oh God," she thought, "if they should meet!" She put her hand to her forehead, trying to calculate the chances for and against such a meeting. Mrs. Harding's visitor might come out upon the terrace at any moment; and his voice might be heard in the still evening calling to the groom who held his horse, or making his last adieux. The two men might pass each other in the darkness unrecognised and in safety; but any chance utterance of the visitor's name by grooms or stable-boys might reveal his neighbourhood, and bring about some fatal encounter.

The days of duelling are past and gone, it may be; but men contrive to kill one another occasionally, nevertheless; and it is not so long since a corpse was carried out of a field in Berkshire, to lie stark and bloody in a darkened chamber at the Barley Mow. The fly-drivers of Windsor point to the green hollow where the victim fell, and relate how quietly the gentlemen alighted from their vehicle and walked across the pleasant meadow. Can the practice of duelling be ever entirely extinct while men have human passions and a human impatience of insupportable insult and injury?

"If they meet there will be some deadly harm," thought Marcia: "I have not forgotten how Godfrey wrote of his enemy only a few months ago. The old wounds had not ceased to bleed. Oh God, keep these two men asunder, for I know there would be peril in their meeting."

The pause was very brief during which Miss Denison thought

all this. Godfrey walked silently by her side in the darkness; it seemed to him enough happiness to be with her. She turned to him presently and laid her hand upon his arm.

"Pray go!" she exclaimed. "You had no right to come back. I have forbore from reproaching you, for I cannot regret it now since it gives me the opportunity of asking you a favour."

"A favour, Marcia! You—will ask any thing of me! Why, that would give my dreary life a kind of charm!"

"You talked just now of taking that terrible journey through Central Asia. Promise me that you will abandon the idea."

"I would rather you asked me any thing else in the world. Do you forget, Marcia, that henceforth there is nothing left for me in life but perilous journeys, and the exploration of solitudes that are new to me? I want to see Schiamyl's fortresses. I want to beat up a new territory. Remember that I have been fifteen years a wanderer. Africa is as stale to me as Oxford Street. You send me away from Scarsdale, Marcia; don't deny me Circassia and the Chinese Wall."

"I shall be miserable, knowing you are in danger," said Marcia, in a low voice. She felt that she had no right to say so much as this. But then talking to a man on the eve of a life-long exile is like talking to a man on his deathbed. "I think if my image haunted your dreams, it must have been because I was tortured night and day by fears for your safety," she added softly.

"You were tortured for me; you suffered for my sake! Oh, my own dear love, I will promise any thing in the world rather than cause you unhappiness."

"Promise then that you will not leave Europe."

"I promise."

"A thousand thanks! And now go. You will leave Scarsdale the first thing to-morrow morning."

"Yes, Marcia, to return to St. Petersburg, where I shall spend the winter. And now farewell. Forgive the folly that has brought me to you, and forget, if possible, that you have seen me. Good-bye, good-bye. God be with you, best and noblest of women!"

He held both her hands in his, and bent his head over them reverently as he said this. Then he turned and left her; and she heard his firm steps upon the gravel-walk as she stood listening in the darkness.

The stable-clock struck the half-hour after seven as she waited between the gnarled espaliers. When the footsteps were quite out of hearing, she walked along the pathway to the stout wooden door by which Godfrey Pierrepont had left the garden.

She opened the door and stood within its threshold still listening. The last yellow light of the departed sun had died out in the west, and the evening star shone fair and bright above the solemn woods. The September night was still and warm. Miss Denison emerged from her garden upon the broad gravelled drive that approached the steps leading to the terrace. She ascended these steps and walked past the lighted windows of the dining-room, where the curtains were very rarely drawn in warm weather. One glance within showed her Mr. Holroyde sitting opposite the Baronet at the round table. So for the present there could be little chance of a meeting between Godfrey Pierrepont and his enemy.

"Thank God!" thought Marcia. "If he goes straight back to the Hermitage, no harm need come of this mad return. Heaven keep him from wandering about the wood to-night!"

She looked up at the purple sky, very calm and beautiful in its profound depth of colour. Venus had summoned her brothers and sisters out of the blue darkness, and the light of a thousand stars shimmered upon the leaves and made a faint silvery brightness upon the grass. Marcia felt sorry that the night should be so beautiful. It was such a night as would beguile an erratic person into lonely wanderings in sylvan glades among the dewy fern.

"If they met face to face in the broad open country, they might recognise each other by this starlight," thought Marcia; "but the wood about the Hermitage will be as black as the bottom of a grave."

She entered the house by one of the French windows of her father's study, and went up stairs to her own sitting-room—the room in which Godfrey Pierrepont had contemplated her portrait more than a year before. A shaded lamp had been placed by the pile of books she had left on the table but she did not take her usual place under the lamplight. She seated herself by one of the windows, and looked out at the distant woods. Seated here, she could hear the voices in the rooms below. Mrs. Harding and Arthur Holroyde came out upon the terrace by-and-by, followed by the Baronet, who was tenderly reminded of the perils of cold night-air. But the widow was not quite her gushing self this evening, and Marcia wondered why she was so quiet.

Mr. Holroyde's horse was brought to the steps at the eastern end of the terrace at about half-past eight. Miss Denison watched him as he mounted and rode away, looking backwards and waving a white hand airily as he disappeared round the circular sweep of the drive. Looking down at the figures on the terrace, Marcia saw the widow sitting in a moody attitude, with her folded arms resting on the stone

balustrade. Sir Jasper spoke to her twice before she raised her drooping head and replied to him.

"Is there any misunderstanding between papa and her?" wondered Miss Denison. "Surely his eyes will be opened as to her real character before he commits himself to any foolish declaration."

But Marcia's mind was not long occupied by her father's enchantress. Whom could she think of to-night but Godfrey Pierrepont?

About a quarter of an hour after Arthur Holroyde had disappeared with that airy wave of his delicate hand, a shot sounded far away in the stillness of the wood.

"Good Heavens, how foolish I am!" thought Marcia, after she had started to her feet pale and trembling; "that sound made my heart grow cold, though I have heard a hundred times that the wood is infested by poachers, who defy the keepers, knowing very well that papa won't prosecute them. Some poor creature whose wife and children are half-starving fired that shot, I dare say."

Miss Denison had been accustomed to be startled by stray shots almost every evening of late—shots which Dorothy explained as "Poachers, please, Miss Marcia; and father says if Sir Jasper isn't more severe with them, there won't be any birds left by-and-by; for they shoot the young birds, Miss Marcia, and wire the young hares, and go on dreadfully."

"If I sit idle here any longer," thought Marcia, "I shall be full of nervous fancies."

So she went to the lamp-lit table, and opened her books. It is something for a woman to be a little bit of a blue-stock-ing when the hour of trouble comes upon her. A parcel of new books had come down from Dulan that afternoon, and Marcia had some volumes of classic history and biography to dip into, written in that light airy manner with which Frenchmen can handle the heaviest subjects. She tried to concentrate her attention upon her book, and succeeded so far as to get through the evening somehow or other. She was even astonished when she looked up at the little time-piece on the mantelshelf, and saw that the hands pointed to half-past eleven. She was dawdling over the putting away of her books and papers, glad to do any thing that occupied the time and would help to shorten a sleepless night, when she was startled by the trampling of footsteps, the ringing of half-a-dozen different bells, and the sound of many voices all talking at once.

She rushed out into the corridor, and thence to the broad landing at the top of the principal staircase, where she met Dorothy flying towards her, pale and breathless.

"What is the matter? Speak, child, speak!" she cried grasping the girl's arm.

"Oh, Miss Marcia—don't be frightened! It's—it's very dreadful, but it's nothing wrong with your papa—or any body you know—but the—the gentleman who was here to-day has been found in the wood—shot—and he's being brought in here, Miss, dead or dying; and they're riding off for doctors right and left. And Mrs. Brownlow is almost beside herself with fright. It's—it's like it was that dreadful night, Miss Marcia, when poor Miss Denison was dying, and nobody seemed calm or able to do any thing quietly, except you."

"Yes," murmured Marcia in a faint voice, "I remember that night; and God grant I may be strong enough to be useful now, if any help can save this miserable man! Where have they carried him, Dorothy?"

"Into the study, Miss. Sir Jasper said he wasn't to be moved a step farther than was necessary. The servants were all crowding about the door, and I just caught a glimpse of the poor gentleman lying on a sofa that had been brought out of the drawing-room, and looking as white and still as a corpse; but Sir Jasper sent us all away, and shut the door; and every body is to go to bed, Mrs. Brownlow says, except Mary Carter, Mr. Hills, and the men who have gone for the doctor."

Mr. Hills was Sir Jasper's own man, and a model of sobriety and solemnity. This gentleman had had so much experience in the nursing of invalids who ailed nothing, that he was almost as good as a doctor."

Throughout the remainder of that night, Marcia kept watch alone in her own room, while Dorothy slumbered peacefully in her little chamber nigh at hand. All that miserable night Marcia sat in the old-fashioned window, ready to help if her help were wanted below, and praying in her heart of hearts for Godfrey Pierrepont, by whose hand she believed the stricken man had fallen.

CHAPTER XXX.

SUNSHINE FOR MR. DOBB.

THE next day was Friday, and Friday loomed a black and gloomy day for Henry Adolphus Dobb, who evidenced so morose a disposition at the domestic breakfast-table, that he drew down upon himself figuratively-worded reproaches to the effect that he had risen from the wrong side of his bed, and was afflicted with a pain in his temper.

Perhaps there is no repast more apt to become weary to the spirit and revolting to the appetite than the dismal meal with which the Englishman with limited means fortifies himself for his day's work. The Parisian may have three courses and a dessert in the Palais-Royal for something under fifteenpence, or in quaint little streets on the other side of the Seine, for something under fivepence. The French peasant in the provinces may have a basin of some mysterious soup, which at the least is savoury, or a bunch of grapes with his hunch of bread, or a pocketful of yellow pears, or a lettuce steeped in oil, and a slice of hard cheese. He may vary his humble *menu* with the changing seasons, and may warm himself with a soup in winter and refresh himself with a fruit in summer, and may impart a patrician tone to his repast at all times by the consumption of a liquor that is at any rate called wine. But the wife of a British clerk with an income of a hundred and twenty pounds per annum thinks she has done her duty to her husband when she has placed before him a stale half-quartern, considerably adulterated with alum, a doubtful French egg boiled hard, and a pat of indifferent butter. And then she sits glaring at him sternly across a dingy British-metal pot of weak tea—that never was grown in China, and whose ghostly resemblance to tea is washed out of it by an immoderate allowance of boiling water; and if he does not do justice to the goods his domestic gods have provided for him, she asks sharply why he doesn't "make a good breakfast."

"I don't know what has come to you, Henry Adolphus, for the last few days," exclaimed Selina, as her husband pushed away an untasted egg. "You've been *that* dull and *that* cross that there's been no bearing you. And as to turning up your nose at an egg because it tastes a little of the straw, it's mere daintiness now that eggs are only fourteen a shilling, and will be dearer between this and Christmas."

"I don't like undeveloped chickens," answered the clerk moodily, "though your proclivities may lie in that direction. I think you might have got me a bloater by this time, knowing I'm fond of 'em; but never mind: 'I likes to be despised,' as the gentleman says in the play. And now I'm off to the office. So fare thee well; and if for ever—still for ever, *et cetera, et cetera* :

My boat is on the shore,
And my bark is on the sea;
But before I go, Tom Moore,
Here's a double health to thee.'

Why the gentleman required a boat *and* a bark is more than I can underconstumble, unless the bark was for the accommodation of that favourite dog of his that he made such a row about," said Mr. Dobb, whose lively wit was not to be quite extinguished by the gloom of despair.

He went to his office presently, brooding darkly upon Gervoise Catheron's treachery, and determined to devote the leisure of his dinner-hour to the hunting out of that gentleman.

"He fought shy of me all yesterday," thought the clerk, "which proves that it was a case of *non andire* with the party he expected to tip up. I saw him hanging about Sloper and Halliday's before I left the office, but when I got out he'd bolted. If I don't get that money between now and to-morrow night, I shall have to cut this place, and that means ruin. Your swells, like Catheron, can manage to live without a character; but who'll help me if I run away, leaving fifty pounds deficient in the safe I had charge of?"

Mr. Dobb made his way to the office with a slow step and a very rueful countenance. The facetious salutation of a lively junior was distasteful to him, though the youthful wit had founded himself on his superior. Henry Adolphus groaned aloud as he hung up his hat, struck by the stoutness of the peg on which he hung it, and which might be a convenient thing to hang himself upon before Saturday night. He walked to his desk with a listless step, and seated himself languidly upon his stool. A heap of letters awaited his inspection—small orders from rustic publicans, excuses from recalcitrant vendors of beer to be drunk on the premises, and so on. He opened them with a mechanical air, and folded each letter lengthwise after reading it, with the envelope inside; for Mr. Dobb was a good man of business; though he did talk of underconstumbling where a rational person would have talked of understanding. He went to work to-day in his usual orderly man-

ner, though his brain was disturbed by the vision of an infuriated employer; but when he came to the last but one of his letters, he grew excited all at once, and tore open the envelope with feverish haste; for that envelope was addressed to Mr. Dobb, and the word *Private* was written above the seal, on the very spot which a sacrilegious thumb must approach if it would tear open the envelope, across the very threshold of the temple as it were. The hand that had written both address and warning inscription was the hand of Gervoise Catheron.

"Another excuse," thought Mr. Dobb with a suppressed groan.

But in the next instant the clerk's face became suddenly radiant. There was no letter in the envelope, which contained only one oblong slip of flimsy paper; and the oblong slip of paper was a fifty-pound note.

Henry Adolphus waited just long enough to convince himself that the note was not some base and spurious counterfeit upon the Bank of Love, or the Bank of Elegance, before he alighted from his stool and executed an elaborate cellar-flap break-down upon the floor of the office. The junior clerk, who was unaccustomed to such a manifestation from his superior during business hours, looked round, like King Jamie when he perused the confessions of ill-fated sorcerers, "in a wonderful admiration."

"I'll tell you what it is, Sparkins," said Mr. Dobb: "it isn't often that I indulge in the cup that cheers and is very likely to inebriate; but I made a very bad breakfast this morning, and I find myself in the last stage of seediness. So you just slip round to the tap and get a pot of the best double-brown, and then slip across to Codgers's for a pork-pie. Nature abhors a vacuum, and I've got a feeling of emptiness that nothing less than half a sixteenpenny pork will assuage. Tell Codgers I don't mind kittens, so long as they are healthy kittens; but measly felines are too much for my feelin's. You owe me one for that, I flatter myself, Sparkins.—And now the venerable proprietor of this location may come home as soon as he likes. 'Richard's himself again!'" soliloquised Mr. Dobb, as he took the business-like precaution of inscribing the number of the fifty-pound note in a little pocket-book, in which there were other numbers. After having done this, he opened the iron safe and put the note into a cash-box where there were notes and gold to some amount.

"The astute old party will be flummuxed by the sight of that note," muttered the clerk, pausing in the act of locking the cash-box. "I haven't taken anything above ten pounds since he's been gone; for he takes jolly good care that the big cheques all come to his net. He'll ask me a lot of questions

about that fifty pounds, *aussi certain que les œufs sont les œufs*," exclaimed the clerk, who, when his spirits were especially gay, was apt to indulge in literal translations of his pet phrases, and would proclaim himself *en haut du tabac*, or demand playfully whether his friends could perceive *de vert dans son œil*.

"It's rather awkward," thought Henry Adolphus; "but I've got the money, that's the grand point, and I must fudge-up some story for the governor. Or perhaps the better plan would be to take the money round to young Halliday before four o'clock this afternoon, and get him to pay it into the bank. It'll save the young swell a lecture; he'd never think of taking a note of anything but the gross amount he pays in."

Having arrived at this determination, Mr. Dobb became quite easy in his mind; and when his junior re-entered the office, bearing a pewter vessel of foaming porter, a very brown pie, with a couple of plates and knives, neatly arranged on a small tray, Henry Adolphus took off his coat in order to enjoy himself thoroughly.

"We're pretty slack this morning, Sparkins," said he; "but you may as well turn that key, so that we mayn't have any intrusive cove walking in upon us while we're taking our refreshment; *consommation*, I saw it inscribed over a *caffy* when I was in Boulogne; but how can you expect any thing but queer ideas about language from a nation that calls hats and bonnets confectionery? Make yourself at home, Sparkins. But, on the other hand, remember the injunction of the immortal Sairey, who, by the way, was not unlike your mother. Don't be savage, Sparkins; because if you give way to angry feelings you'll choke yourself. Indignation and pork-pie cannot dwell together, as the poet remarked apropos to youth and age. You may not take my allusion to your maternal parent as a compliment, but it was meant in kindness."

When a young gentleman of sixteen regales himself at the expense of a gentleman of seven-and-twenty, he must expect to be trampled upon. If the junior clerk was angered by his superior's discourse, he drowned his anger in brown-stout.

"There's such a lot of people over at Codgers's," he said; "and they're in a fine state of excitement. I suppose you heard the news as you came down to the office?"

"What news?" cried Mr. Dobb. "A blessed lot of news I could have heard, seeing that I didn't speak to a creature between this and home!"

"What, you haven't heard, then?"

"No; don't I tell you, stoopid!"

The junior clerk's heart thrilled with a sense of triumph. It was not often that he obtained any advantage over his

senior. But to be able to impart an important piece of local intelligence to that gentleman was in a manner to get the better of him. Henry Adolphus felt himself humiliated, but he was too great a creature to succumb before an inferior.

"Come," he said sharply, reassuming the tone of the master, "clear up those bits of fat, and put the tray in the corner over there. We can't have too much of this sort of thing in business hours," added the clerk, as if the pork-pie luncheon had been a suggestion of the junior's, rather than a weakness of the great Dobb himself. "Turn that key in the lock, and get back to your desk like one o'clock."

The clerk mounted his own stool as he spoke, and began to write noisily with a very hard quill-pen.

"Now then," he exclaimed in his most careless manner, after writing busily for about five minutes, "what's this row over at Codgers's?"

The junior had been cheated out of his triumph. He had anticipated the delight of astonishing the mighty Dobb; and behold, that master mind demanded his story as if it had been the recitation of a lesson. The whole affair was flat and tame, and Mr. Sparkins imparted his news in quite a subdued manner.

"There's been a gentleman shot in Scarsdale wood," he said; "a gentleman who dined with Sir Jasper yesterday, and left the Abbey to ride home last night between eight and nine. And he was found by some men who were going through the wood at eleven o'clock, and they carried him home to the Abbey, and he isn't expected to live."

"Who shot him?" asked Mr. Dobb sternly.

"That's just what nobody knows; poachers, perhaps; there are lots of 'em always prowling about Scarsdale after dark at this time of year. And there's a talk that the gentleman had money about him."

"Who was—or who is the gentleman?"

"Mr.—Mr. Holford, I think they call him."

"Humph! I haven't the honour of his acquaintance."

"He was visiting at Marchbrooke, they say."

"Ah," exclaimed the clerk, with supreme indifference, "I dare say. Of course there'll be all sorts of false reports about. I shall hear the rights and wrongs of the story from my wife's cousin Dorothy Tursgood, who is quite a confidential companion of Miss Denison's. I shall get my information from headquarters, Sparkins, and I'll let you know all about this business to-morrow."

Utterly crushed by the patronage of his superior, the junior clerk went on with his work—copying figures out of one book into another book, and ruling double lines with red ink. Mr.

Dobb took advantage of his dinner-time to carry the cash-box to Mr. Halliday's house, which was a pleasant old Georgian mansion in a lane where the towers of the cathedral made a perpetual coolness with their dark and solemn shadows. Mr. Halliday was a gay young bachelor; and the clerk found him lolling on a sofa with a cigar in his mouth and a French novel in his hand, but an open treatise on algebra and a desk on the table near him went to show that he had at least been making some attempt at study.

"How do, Dobb?" he said. "Sit down and make yourself at home. Nothing wrong at the shop, I hope?"

"No, Sir; it's all—correct." Henry Adolphus had almost shaped the syllables "serene," but pulled himself up in deference to his employer, who was a very young man, and talked slang, but not Mr. Dobb's slang.

"I brought round the cash-box, Sir," said the clerk, placing the precious casket on Mr. Halliday's table, "thinking you might like to pay in the rhi—ready-money, before the—Mr. Sloper came home. It might look more the chee—business-like, you know, Sir; for there's over a hundred there, and Mr. Sloper——"

"Oh, yes, I understand. He would have read me a lecture for not looking after things at the office; and you've brought me this money to save me a scrape. It's very friendly of you, Dobb; and I'm much obliged. Have some claret and seltzer; it's capital stuff for this weather. You'll find a jar of the genuine Nassau in that cupboard, and a bottle of decent St. Julien; and if you ring the bell, I dare say they can get us a lump of ice."

But Mr. Dobb declined to avail himself of his employer's hospitality. He was anxious to get back to the office, he said. On any other occasion he would have been very glad to drink claret and seltzer with the dashing young Halliday; not that he particularly cared about claret and seltzer—but because it would have been such a delightful thing to have boasted of his intimacy with his employer, to the humiliation of his own circle. To-day he felt like an impostor, for he had come to Mr. Halliday in order to get out of his own difficulty, and not with an unselfish desire to oblige that gentleman. But the junior partner thrust a handful of choice cigars upon the clerk in his desire that he might get some reward for his trouble, and Dobb departed from the Georgian mansion, and emerged out of the shadow of the cathedral towers, enriched but remorseful.

He found every one in Roxborough full of that dark deed which had been done in Scarsdale wood; and every body of any importance had his own theory of the case, and was obsti-

nately deaf to the argument of any body who advanced any other theory. Henry Adolphus delighted his wife by the cheerfulness of his spirit that evening as he lingered over his tea, and was not altogether unmoved himself by the silent evidence of a wife's love and duty, which he found between two plates on the tea-table, in the shape of a very fine bloater.

"It's a soft roe, Henry Adolphus," said Mrs. Dobb; "I thought you'd like a relish with your cup of tea. And I got a crusty twopenny of to-day's bake on purpose for you," added the dutiful wife, as she cut a slice from a stale half-quartern for her own consumption.

Mr. and Mrs. Dobb discussed the outrage in Scarsdale wood at length as they sat over their tea; and after the tray had been removed, Miss Pennekit's dress was neglected while Selina wrote to her cousin Dorothy, beseeching that young lady to take tea at Amanda Villas on the following evening.

"I am sure Miss Denison will let you come," wrote Mrs. Dobb, "and *of course* Mr. Catheron will see you home."

"Won't he though!" exclaimed the clerk as he perused this sentence in his wife's letter. "I expect he will drop in this evening—as large as life; and I hope you'll do the civil to him, 'Lina, and not show your teeth as you did the last time he was here, for he's behaved very well to me in a little transaction we've had lately."

"What!" cried the alarmed Selina, "you haven't been lending him money I hope, Henry Adolphus?"

"Well, I did lend him a few pounds; but he *has* acted on the square, and it's all serene."

Mr. Dobb had not forgotten the I O U's which he held for his lost thirty pounds, but he fondly believed that Gervoise would eventually find the money to redeem those documents, as he had done when hard driven for the still more pressing debt.

Selina promised to be civil to the sub-lieutenant whenever he appeared. But Mr. Catheron did not drop in that evening as the clerk had expected him to do.

CHAPTER XXXI.

NUMBER 69669.

THE family surgeon and another surgeon—a mighty master of his awful science, who had been summoned from London by telegram—held a consultation in the yellow drawing-room at the Abbey as to the state of Mr. Arthur Holroyde, lying on his impromptu bed in the darkened and silent chamber where the grim Neptune drove his sea-horses above the index of time.

The two surgeons had no very satisfactory account to give of their patient. He had been shot in the back, and the bullet had gone through the lungs. This was the gist of what the surgeons stated, though they shrouded the dismal truth in a hazy atmosphere of technicalities. There had been cases in which men had survived the perforation of the lungs by a bullet, and had lived to be strong and hearty again; but these cases were few, so few that the London surgeon was able to give Sir Jasper a catalogue of them as he discussed the state of his patient.

"I shall remain here for to-night, since you wish me to do so," said the great man; "for I will not conceal from you the fact that the case is critical, very critical, and I doubt if my worthy coadjutor has had much experience of such cases. My people will telegraph to me if I am urgently wanted in London, and I shall go back by an early train—in time for my consultations. In the mean time I shall be on the spot to watch for any change in the symptoms."

"Let every thing that is within the compass of medical science be done for this gentleman," said Sir Jasper; "he is neither my friend nor my kinsman; but he has been my guest and was on his homeward way from my house when he was struck by his assassin. I scarcely know whether I am most anxious for the preservation of his life, or the discovery of his treacherous assailant."

André Chénier called the classic goddess of vengeance a "*Némësis tardive*;" but modern justice is rarely slow of foot. The clerk at Roxborough station, who telegraphed the message that summoned the great surgeon, telegraphed another message that was carried straight to the chiefs of Scotland Yard; and before the surgeon had left his consulting-room in Cavendish Square, a detective officer was on his way to Roxborough, to hold solemn conference with the local police and to begin his work forthwith. Of course he proceeded without loss of time

to the Abbey, stopping to inspect the scene of the murder on his way ; the spot where the gentleman's horse had been found neighing dismally, and the other spot where the gentleman himself was discovered lying on his face, and leading up to which there was a trail, which showed how the gentleman had been dragged some yards before his foot disengaged itself from the stirrup. At the Abbey, the detective honoured Mrs. Brownlow with a hearing, and received from that lady the contents of Arthur Holroyde's pockets. After inspecting these, the official waited on Sir Jasper Denison. "I think I have got at the motive of the attack, Sir," he said, "and that's something. Did you know that the gentleman had a considerable sum of money about him?"

"No, I am quite ignorant of his affairs."

"Well, he had, Sir. Three hundred pounds in bank notes ; I've found the numbers of the notes in his pocket-book, with the date of their receipt. They were received yesterday."

"That is quite impossible," answered Sir Jasper ; "Mr. Holroyde never quitted my house yesterday until he left it in the evening. There must be a mistake in the date."

"Well, there may be, Sir ; but I should fancy from the look of the gentleman's pocket-book that he was a very methodical par—person. We're obliged to look into papers and letters, and such like, you see, Sir, without leave or license when a gentleman has been all but murdered, and doesn't know who attacked him. I suppose there was no one in your house, Sir, likely to pay Mr. Holroyde money."

"Most decidedly not."

"Do you think he received the notes by post?"

"No ; he could receive no letter in this house, for his presence here was accidental."

"Well, then, Sir, I suppose the date must be wrong. You see it's a little pocket-book, with the pages divided for every day in the year, and in the division that's dated September 16, Thursday, there's the entry about this three hundred, and the numbers of the notes in a very clear handwriting. Well, Sir, I'm inclined to think the gentleman had these notes upon him when he was shot. Your housekeeper had the good sense not to meddle with his clothes when they were taken off him, and I found his waistcoat-pocket pulled inside out. It's pretty likely the notes were in that very pocket. Your housekeeper tells me she can swear to the pocket being like that when the gentleman was brought in. It's tolerably clear to my mind that the gentleman had the notes, and that they were taken from him after he was shot. If it was so, we oughtn't to have much difficulty in getting at the individual who did it, unless he's an old hand and has sent the notes abroad. You might

dispose of a million of money that way, and not have it traced home to you very easily. However, I don't think the gentleman was shot by an old hand. It's more likely to have been done by some country yokel, and if so we shall be down upon him before he has time to get rid of his plunder. I've had a look at the place where the business happened, and there's a hollow amongst the fern that looks as if a man had been lying in wait there for some hours. I think I can about guess the build of the man by the shape of that hollow, and if I'm right, he wasn't a very big fellow. A youngster perhaps! It's rather like a youngster's business this."

Sir Jasper listened gravely to the detective. There are occasions on which the most inveterate *persifleur* is fain to be serious. Voltaire was very much in earnest when he busied himself with rehabilitation of Calas; and Horace Walpole was quite serious when he pleaded for unlucky Admiral Byng.

"I beg that you will offer a reward of a hundred pounds—to be paid by me—for the apprehension of the wretch who committed this outrage," said the Baronet. "The gentleman was my guest; and if his life cannot be saved, I am bound to see that his death is avenged. I have made inquiries respecting his friends, and find that he stands quite alone in the world, or, at any rate, that there is no one he would care to have summoned to his bedside."

This was all that Sir Jasper had to say to the detective, who retired very well pleased with his mission, which promised to be a profitable one; for it was more than likely that he, and he alone, would touch the reward so liberally offered.

Dorothy accepted her cousin's invitation, and duly presented herself at Amanda Villas on the afternoon of that Saturday to which the clerk had looked forward with such terror. It was not a time for tea-drinkings or junkettings. There was a solemn hush in the chambers of Scarsdale Abbey, and an odour as of a tanyard pervaded the atmosphere about the mansion; for oak bark was strewn a foot thick on the broad carriage-drive, and the gig of the local surgeon, and the fly which conveyed the great practitioner from London, rolled noiselessly as on velvet. It was not a time for tea-drinking, for Arthur Holroyde lay in Sir Jasper's study hovering between life and death—and oh! so much nearer death than life; and Dorothy was fain to pretend some solemn engagement of long standing when she asked permission to visit her cousin.

That permission, however, was very readily granted by Miss Denison. "Yes, go by all means, my dear," she said; "it will be good for you to be away from this dreadful house."

So Dorothy left the Abbey after an early dinner with her

friend and patroness, Mrs. Browning, who was much grander and more condescending in her manner than Marcia Denison. Under ordinary circumstances Dorothy would have been the last person in the world to leave that silent house for any tea-drinking, for her heart was tender and compassionate, and she had lain awake for some time in the two last nights thinking what a dreadful thing it would be if Mr. Holroyde were to die; and had prayed to the holy Mother and all manner of saints and angels for his recovery, in her simple childish way—just as she would have entreated an earthly mother and earthly friends. But she was in love—it was for the love of Gervoise Catheron that she went to Roxborough this September afternoon. Had not Selina promised that he should escort her home? Of course that implied that he was to be of the tea-party. And she wanted so much to see him, and to hear his troubles; to know whether he had been able to pay that cruel tobacconist, or to appease the wrath of the pitiless tailor who was so unjustifiably angry at being cheated out of his goods and labour. She wanted to see him. This love of hers was all suffering, and yet she wanted to suffer more. The tender heart was ready to bleed anew, whenever the ruthless god should be pleased to plant fresh arrows in the faithful breast.

But a disappointment awaited poor Dorothy at Amanda Villas. She found the little parlour very neat, and an elegant repast of muffins and water-cresses adorning the table. There were no vestiges of Miss Pennekit's dress, which had been carried home in a cotton handkerchief early that afternoon, to be worn by Miss Pennekit on the following Sabbath, with a view to the utter annihilation of her particular friends during church service. Mr. Dobb was radiant, for Sloper had returned early in the afternoon, and had been much gratified by the clerk's account of business during his absence, and with the sharpness that had distinguished that gentleman's proceedings *in re* certain doubtful customers of the firm. But there was no Gervoise Catheron. Poor Dorothy scalded herself with boiling tea, and nearly choked herself with muffin from sheer mortification of spirit.

"I thought, perhaps, Gervoise might be here," she ventured to whisper to Selina presently, with a piteous assumption of indifference. Whereon Selina told her that Henry Adolphus had not set eyes upon Mr. Catheron since Wednesday night, but that he—the lieutenant—was expected to drop in at any moment.

"You know how very intimate he is with Dobb," said Selina, "let alone his being likely to see you here. It's not often three days go by without our seeing him."

"I hope—there's—nothing the matter with him," faltered

Dorothy, across whose vivid imagination there flitted a vision of nearly all the sudden calamities that can afflict humanity.

"Why, what should be the matter with him?" exclaimed Selina. "I shall think you don't like the muffins, Dorothy if you don't make a better tea. Give your cousin some of those cresses, Henry Adolphus, they're the finest I ever partook of."

Dorothy's heart grew a little lighter after this. Gervoise Catheron might come at any moment. She tried not to listen to stray footsteps in the street; she did her best to answer all the eager questions with which her host and hostess assailed her, and to give a faithful account of all that had happened since the outrage in Searsdale wood.

Mr. and Mrs. Dobb were ravenous for information upon this soul-absorbing topic; and Dorothy had to go over the same ground several times before they were appeased. Had she seen the gentleman before he left the Abbey? and how had he looked? and what had he said? and was there any thing particular about his ways? and so on. The Dobbs evidently considered that a gentleman who was about to be murdered ought to make a point of differing in some respect from commonplace people who are in no immediate danger of losing their lives.

Mr. Dobb had rarely enjoyed himself more thoroughly than he did this evening. Of course he had his own theories about the attack on Arthur Holroyde—theories which he expanded at large for the benefit of his wife and her cousin. His ideas on the subject were very profound; and his exposition of them was somewhat obscure. He told his companions how he should act if he were the detective, and threw quite a new light upon the machinery of secret police, so elaborate was the scheme of detection which he set forth; and then he told them what he should say if he were counsel for the unknown assassin; and how he should charge the jury if he were the judge before whom the trial took place. He made himself crimson in the face as he delivered his speech for the defence; and made Selina's flimsy plated candlesticks quite leap as he slapped the table at the end of his energetic periods. It was only when the trial was over, and the judge had put on the black cap and had pronounced sentence on the unknown assassin, that Dorothy put her hand into her pocket and discovered a folded paper, whose contents, she thought, might possibly prove interesting to her companions.

"I quite forgot that I had it in my pocket," she said, as she unfolded the broad black-and-white poster. It's a bill offering a reward for the apprehension of the murderer. There are hun-

hundreds of them printed ; and they are to be posted up in every part of the country, and in London too, I believe."

"Why, Dorothy," cried the clerk, with something like indignation in his tone, "what a little fool you were not to show us this before!"

He spread the bill upon the table, and read its contents aloud with intense gusto. But he paused and grew suddenly thoughtful as he read the numbers of the missing notes. He had a ready memory for figures, and one of those numbers seemed strangely familiar to him.

"69669!" he repeated: "I've a sort of recollection of writing some such number as that a day or two ago; for I remember thinking it was all loops and tails."

He paused for a few moments, scratching his head with a puzzled expression of face, and staring at the bill that lay spread out upon the table before him. Then he made a sudden pounce at his pocket, and produced a little memorandum-book. He turned the leaves with a rapid hand, and looked at the last entry.

"Good God!" he cried, starting to his feet, "one of the notes is the very one that Gervoise Catheron paid me yesterday morning."

Dorothy sprang to her feet too, white and trembling.

"Oh, how can you say that!" she cried. "You cannot think that Gervoise was the man who shot Mr. Holroyde!"

She stood looking at him for a moment, and then exclaimed with a little half-hysterical laugh:

"How silly I am!—as if Gervoise would hurt any one for all the money in the world. The wicked wretch who robbed Mr. Holroyde must have palmed the note off upon Gervoise. It won't bring him into any danger, will it? Oh, Henry Adolphus, tell me that it can't bring him into any danger!"

"I don't know about that," answered Mr. Dobb moodily. "When there's been highway robbery and murder, and an innocent man disposes of a portion of the property within something like twelve hours after the event, the innocent man is rather liable to find himself in a jolly disagreeable fix. I don't know how it may be for Catheron; but I know it's likely to be uncommon awkward for me."

And on this it was Selina's turn to be alarmed. That lady made a rush at her husband and embraced him hysterically, asking if it was to come to this, that a respectable young married man was to be accused of murder; and "Oh, didn't I warn you harm would come of being intimate with Gervoise Catheron? and oh, Henry Adolphus, they never, never, never shall tear you to the scaffold;" and uttering a great many

lamentations of the same character, which would have been extremely appropriate if the myrmidons of the law had been at that moment waiting to carry out the final arrangements for Mr. Dobb's execution.

The clerk extricated himself with some difficulty from the encircling arms of his wife.

"Don't be a fool, 'Lina," he exclaimed, "and don't begin bellowing till we know whether there's any thing to bellow about. I dare say it will all come right enough in the end. Of course Catheron must know where he got the money, and who gave it to him; and I dare say he'll be able to put the detectives on the right scent, and perhaps get the reward for his pains," added Mr. Dobb, rather enviously. "Some fellows are always dropping into luck; and the more idle and good-for-nothing they are, and the less they do to deserve it, the more they drop into it."

Mr. Catheron's career during his residence at Castleford had not been distinguished by any particular success; but for the moment the clerk felt as if his friend had been one of Fortune's most favoured children.

"I'll tell you what it is," said Mr. Dobb, "I'll just run round to the barracks and see if I can get hold of Catheron. I may be able to put him up to a good thing. Stop where you are till I come back, Doll. I dare say I shall bring Gervoise with me, and we'll both walk home with you."

Dorothy consulted her neat little silver watch. Social tea-drinkings at Amanda Villas took place at a very early hour, and though the evening had seemed quite a long one, it was now only half-past eight.

"Come back as soon as you can, please, Henry Adolphus," said Dorothy; "I musn't stay here after nine."

But she did stay after nine, for nine o'clock struck while Mr. Dobb was still absent. Poor Dorothy sat in silent agony awaiting his return, though she kept arguing with herself that there could be no cause for terror or anguish. Surely no harm could come of Gervoise Catheron's accidental possession of one of those missing notes. She knew nothing of the law of evidence; she had never studied the science of crime, or troubled herself about the details of those dreadful deeds which had been done within her memory, and whose dark records she had listened to, pale and shuddering, when the chief butler deigned to read aloud from the London papers in Mrs. Browning's room. She had no notion of the extent of the danger to which her lover was exposed; but she was stricken with fear and anguish nevertheless. It seemed so dreadful that the man she loved should be in any way involved in this dark mystery of crime and horror. So she sat pale and miserable, waiting for

the clerk's return, and deriving very little consolation from Mrs Dobb, whose discourse ran chiefly upon her own feelings, and the prophetic terror with which she had been inspired with regard to Gervoise Catheron, and the numerous warnings she had given her husband upon the subject of his friendship with the lieutenant, and the foreshadowings of the present state of affairs, which had been revealed to her in her dreams.

"I dreamt of riding in a third-class carriage only the night before last," said Selina, "and I think you'll allow that looked like coming down in the world; and Dobb was sitting opposite to me eating green apples. I never did like dreaming of unripe fruit; it signifies failure in your plans, you know, and you'll find it explained in that way in Napoleon Bonaparte's own Dream-Book. And then the carriage came to a dead-stop all at once, and we were told to get out; and it wasn't a carriage after all, but a steamer going on dry land, and the paddle-wheels had stuck in the ground, which of course I understand to signify that you are sure to come to harm when you choose acquaintance in a higher station to your own and get out of your element, as it were—— But I see you're not listening, Dorothy; so I'll say no more."

"Oh, yes, Selina, I am listening. But you frighten me so when you talk of those bad dreams. I shall die if any harm comes to Gervoise."

"It's like your selfishness to think of nothing but your Gervaises. But I feel myself bound to tell you that I'm afraid there's trouble in store for you, Dorothy. I dreamt last week that I saw you dressed in pink; and I never yet knew any good to come of dreaming of a pink dress."

While Mrs. Dobb was thus feeding the vague fear that oppressed poor Dorothy, the clerk's latch-key sounded in the street-door, and in another moment Henry Adolphus entered the little sitting-room. He was paler than Dorothy, and the humorous faculty seemed to have deserted him for the time being.

"Here's a pretty black look-out for us all!" he said; "Catheron has bolted—hasn't shown himself at the barracks since Thursday night; and his commanding-officer came out, as I was making my inquiries, and has been hauling me over the coals to any extent; and accusing me of being concerned in Catheron's going to the bad: low company, and two penny-halfpenny betting, and pot-houses, and all that sort of thing, has been pelted at my head for the last half-hour.

If it wasn't for such as you," said the swell, "there wouldn't be so many junior officers a disgrace to their corps. I have reported Mr. Catheron's disappearance to the Admiralty," he said, "and if he comes back, there'll be a court-martial held

for the investigation of his conduct,' and then he called to one of the men : ' See this person out at the gates,' he said, ' and don't let me hear of him hanging about here again ; ' and upon that he turned upon his heel and walked off. Oh, shouldn't I have liked to have presented him with a testimonial in the shape of a small piece of my mind ! "

Mr. Dobb might have said more in his indignation ; but at this juncture his attention was called to Dorothy, who had fainted " dead off," as Selina said.



CHAPTER XXXII.

A DISMAL SABBATH.

To Marcia those silent days were very terrible in which the house was hushed, and every sound of human footstep and human voice suppressed, in order that the fitful slumbers of Arthur Holroyde should at least be unbroken by any external cause. During those dreadful days the daughter of the house sat alone in her room ; sat for hours motionless and silent—in seeming almost apathetic, but in reality possessed by a terror so profound that it deprived her of all power of action.

She had been told that there was no hope for Arthur Holroyde. He might linger so many hours, so many days even, but it was only a question as to the endurance of his pain. Lingering or slow as the footsteps of Death might be, they were approaching him none the less surely. The utmost that medical science could do for Arthur Holroyde was to slacken the pace of those fatal footsteps. Marcia Denison knew this ; and she fully believed that the dying man had been stricken by the hand of Godfrey Pierrepont.

Had he not said that if they two met, there would be a ruder justice than any to be obtained in courts of law—a hastier settlement of a dishonoured husband's wrongs than could be effected by the prosings of proctors or the decree of any mortal parliament ? And a fatal accident had brought about their meeting ; and this was what had come of it. She had thought much of the possibility of such an encounter, after her interview with Godfrey ; but even amidst the vague terror that tormented her, there had been the hope—nay, more than the hope—the belief that Christian feeling would restrain his

hand, that he would let his enemy go—half in mercy, half in scorn—as he might release some hunted beast that was scarcely worthy to become an honest hunter's prey.

Her fears for Godfrey Pierrepont locked her lips. She had made no inquiry as to the mode and manner of the attack upon Arthur Holroyde. If she had known that he had been shot in the back, she might have been spared the anguish of these terrible days; for under no circumstances could she have believed Godfrey Pierrepont an assassin. She fancied that the men had met each other face to face; and there on the spot, without time for consideration or ceremonial observance, some rude duel had taken place between them, and the guilty man had fallen by the hand of the avenger. She thought this, and the horror of the thought froze her very soul. She dared not ask any question about the tragic mystery. However cautiously she might speak, some unlucky word might be dangerous, perhaps fatal, to him.

"I am groping in darkness," she thought, "I will not speak of this thing at all. I will not open my lips upon this subject, for fear I should do mischief."

And Dorothy, seeing her mistress so pale and silent, so cold and reserved, could not take heart to speak of the tragedy. She had told Miss Denison of the great surgeon's sentence of death, the particulars of which had penetrated to the housekeeper's room; but this was all she had dared to say. Sir Jasper kept his apartments, and Mrs. Harding also remained in her own room, quite prostrated by the shock, she told Mrs. Browning, when the housekeeper visited her in her darkened chamber. It may seem an easy thing to kill a mandarin when a wish only is sufficient to do the deed, and there is all the distance between Europe and Asia to divide the victim from his murderer. But what if the evil wish has been father to the deed, and the mandarin attacked by a blundering hand has been brought home to die by inches under the very roof that shelters his murderer? *That* contingency can scarcely be very agreeable. Mrs. Harding groaned aloud as she rejected some sloppy invalid nourishment which the housekeeper had carried her.

"No, you dear good creature," she exclaimed,—for there were few circumstances under which she forgot to be civil,—
"I don't want any arrow-root. This dreadful event has brought on my neuralgia; and arrow-root is no use in neuralgia. Do go away—that's a dear kind soul. I *know* you're wanted down stairs." And then when the chamber-door had closed upon the dear good soul, Blanche Harding flung off the bedclothes and rose, tall and ghost-like, and terrible to look upon in her white garments. She rose and

paced the room with her bare feet—a modern Jane Shore, and with more than Jane Shore's sins upon her soul.

"Oh God," she cried, "what a wretch I am! Was there ever such a wicked creature as I? How many years am I to endure my dreadful life; and how shall I dare to die when my time comes?"

The house was like a tomb during these dismal days of waiting on the fatal footsteps. The servants glided to and fro like the ghosts in Hades. The tongue of the dinner-bell was dumb; no regular meals of any description were served in the upper regions; but trays were carried up stairs, and carried down again with their contents very often untasted. Who could eat or drink while those stealthy footsteps were advancing through the silence?

It might have been long before Marcia Denison aroused herself from the deadly stupor which had oppressed her since the night of the murder, if there had not arisen a sudden need for her womanly care and tenderness. On the Sunday after the fatal night, Dorothy fell ill, very ill, alarmingly ill; and Marcia's heart melted all at once when she found her little *protégée* tossing her feverish head on a tumbled pillow, and uttering wild incoherent talk. The family doctor came to look at the sick girl, and prescribed some simple effervescing draught.

"Mental excitement, no doubt," he said; "and perhaps a sudden chill into the bargain. Girls of this age are so reckless. Don't be alarmed, Miss Denison, we shall bring your little maid round; depend upon it."

Marcia dismissed the housemaid who had been the first to discover Dorothy's illness, and had been administering weak tea and strong smelling-salts, under the belief that those two restoratives were infallible in all mortal illness. The girl was kind-hearted, but rough and clumsy: so Marcia dismissed her and took up her post at Dorothy's bedside, with a New Testament open on the little table near her, and a weary, weary heart.

"Oh, let me do some good in this world," she thought. "I can do nothing for *him*. He is surrounded by dangers, and I cannot stretch out my hand to help him."

It was a weary, weary Sunday. The bells of Scarsdale Church seemed to be ringing all day; and indeed this is an attribute of church-bells in general if you do not go to church. In Marcia's sad fancy they sounded like funeral bells.

"Where has he gone?" she thought; "what has he done since that night?"

She had not dared to ask if Godfrey Pierrepont were at the Hermitage. To betray that he had been in the neighbourhood

might be to betray him to trial and doom. Lynch-law in England is apt to be called murder; and the days are long gone by in which any irregular midnight-duel would be pronounced justifiable homicide. So she dared not utter the name by which Godfrey Pierrepont was known at Scarsdale. She dared not wander out into the wood in the hope of encountering him; lest the sight of her should lure him from some hiding-place and entrap him in some unknown danger.

She could only wonder about him. Was he lying somewhere in the wood, hidden deep in a forest of fern, waiting a safe hour for his flight? or had he left the place boldly, showing himself in the face of men, and starting anew on his wild journeyings across the earth? It would be more consistent with his character to do this: and Marcia shuddered as she thought how easily he might be found and brought back—brought back to disgrace and death.

It was dusk, and for the first time in many hours Marcia had fallen into a doze—a slumber almost as feverish as that of the girl she was tending. Confused dreams full of vague terror disturbed her as she slept: but through them all she was conscious that they were only dreams, and conscious also of the melancholy sick-chamber and Dorothy's feverish moanings, as she tossed her tumbled hair from side to side upon her pillow.

"Don't! don't!" cried the girl; "don't say that! It wasn't him—it couldn't be him!"

She had been very incoherent in her little intervals of delirium, and had talked of so many things, and had said the same things so often, that poor Marcia's brain had grown bewildered by the senseless repetition. But now in her semi-somnolent state she found herself listening to the girl's wild talk.

"The notes!" cried Dorothy; "no, no, no!—not the same note—not the same number—not the same——"

The door was opened while the girl lay with her hands clasped entreatingly, reiterating incoherent sentences—in which the words "notes" and "numbers" occurred repeatedly. Mrs. Browning entered with a cup of tea and some ethereal bread-and-butter on a small silver tray.

"I've brought you a cup of nice strong tea, Miss," said the old woman; "do please try to eat a few mouthfuls of bread-and-butter with it—you've had nothing since breakfast, Miss Marcia." The old servants at Scarsdale rarely called their young mistress "Miss Denison." "And such a breakfast! I saw the tray that Sanders brought down stairs, and the things on it had been scarcely touched. Dear Miss Marcia, you'll make yourself ill."

"I don't think it will much matter if I am ill," Marcia answered wearily. "I can't eat, Browning. Well, I'll take some tea and bread-and-butter to please you. I'm afraid Dorothy is very ill; she has been delirious again since I gave her her medicine."

The sick girl was still talking in the same dreary moaning voice. The housekeeper, who was omnipotent in the Abbey in the time of sickness or death, went to the bedside and bent over the restless little figure.

"How she does go on about notes and numbers!" said Mrs. Browning; "I do think she's worrying her poor head with the thoughts of that bill that the police-officer from London has had printed."

"What bill?"

"The bill offering a reward for the apprehension of the murderer."

"Who—who has offered the reward?"

"Your papa, Miss Marcia. He has acted like a noble gentleman as he is. Mr. Holroyde was his visitor, he said, and was not to be assassinated with im—— I think it's punity, isn't it, Miss? but those long words do bother me sometimes. The police-officer told me all about it."

"I should like to see one of those bills, Browning," said Marcia in a faint voice. A reward offered, and by her father! The sleuth-hounds of the law had their hungry teeth sharpened by the promise of gold.

"I'll get you one of the placards, if you like, Miss Marcia," said the housekeeper, "there are plenty of them in my room."

The dame went out into the corridor, where she found an active young housemaid, whom she despatched in quest of what she wanted. It would have taken Mrs. Browning herself a long time to journey to and fro the lower regions, but the active young housemaid made light of passage and stairs, and tripped back very speedily with the placard in her hand. The housekeeper carried it to Marcia, and then for the first time Marcia discovered that Arthur Holroyde had been robbed of £300.

That discovery was the most overpowering joy she had ever known in her life. To her the fact of the robbery seemed conclusive evidence of Godfrey Pierrepont's innocence. A meaner-minded woman might have suspected that the robbery was a blind—a mere device intended to throw the police on the wrong scent. But Marcia had no such thought as this. Her fears had deeply wronged the man who loved her; but she had never wronged him so deeply as to think him capable of any crawling baseness. Whatever a noble savage might do unblushingly, she fancied it was just possible that Godfrey

Pierrepoint might have done in a moment of ungovernable anger. But to rifle the senseless form of his victim, to defile his fingers by contact with his enemy's sordid money—no! such a deed as that could never be done by any scion of a proud and honourable race.

When she had in some manner recovered from the overpowering emotion that came with the discovery of Godfrey's innocence, Marcia ventured for the first time to speak freely of the deed that had been done. She questioned Mrs. Browning, and heard the details of the crime. The victim had been shot in the back. Ah, thank Heaven! he would attack no enemy thus; face to face only could such as he encounter his foe. Marcia listened quietly to all the housekeeper had to tell her, and then sat brooding over the terrible story as the twilight grew more sombre, and the last reflection of the setting sun faded slowly on the western wall. And every now and then Dorothy's wild talk broke in upon her reverie, and the girl's chief cry was still about numbers and notes.

All at once she started up in bed and cried aloud—

"Oh! no, no, no, Selina! don't be cruel—don't say he did it!"

Marcia sprang to her feet.

"Good Heavens!" she exclaimed, "this girl knows something about the murder."

She was petrified with astonishment. Could the wretch who had committed the crime be any one of Dorothy's kindred—men who were renowned for their long service and rugged honesty? The girl's illness, which the doctor said was caused by excitement of the mind rather than disorder of the body; her wild talk about the contents of the placard; and then that cry of anguish—"Don't say he did it!"—all pointed to one conclusion.

"What am I to do?" thought Marcia. "I cannot betray the girl's unconscious utterances; that would be too cruel, too hard. But if *he* should be suspected, if *he* should be in danger; or if any innocent man should be suspected? What am I to do? Oh God, restore this girl to reason, and if she knows the secret of the crime, unseal her lips, for the sake of the innocent!"

Marcia fell upon her knees by her maid's sick bed, and prayed. There are crises in the life of a woman in which only prayer can save her from despair and madness. The supernal calm which comes down upon the souls of faithful applicants descended upon Marcia Denison's spirit as the night closed round the kneeling figure.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A VERY NARROW ESCAPE.

THAT was by no means a pleasant Sunday which Mr. Dobb spent after the discovery of Gervoise Catheron's disappearance from Castleford. It seemed very clear that the bank-note which had replaced the abstracted money had been procured in some underhand and mysterious way. How darkly mysterious the mode in which it had been obtained, Henry Adolphus dared not contemplate, even in his most secret thoughts. The most pressing question just now was how far he himself could be affected by the fact that one of the missing notes had passed through his hands.

"I think horse-racing must have been invented by the devil," thought the unfortunate Dobb; "or it would never get a man into such a scrape as I'm in. What a happy dog I was before I met Catheron, or knew any thing about his Farringdon-Street betting!"

And then he reflected upon his friend's disappearance.

"Catheron was up to his very eyebrows in debt," he thought; "and I dare say he found the place too hot to hold him at last, and made up his mind to cut it. He was always talking of the likelihood of his getting kicked out of his regiment or being obliged to make a bolt of it sooner or later. But if this man at the Abbey dies, and they don't find the real murderer, it will be uncommon unlucky for the lieutenant that he should have made his bolt the very day after the murder."

The more he considered this unfortunate coincidence, the more darkly strange it appeared to the mind of Mr. Dobb.

"How did Catheron come by that bank-note?" he thought. "It wasn't much over twelve hours after the murder when I found the money on my desk? How did he come by it? Good God! it makes my brain turn giddy as I think of it. Only twelve hours!"

Of all things most difficult to believe or realise must surely be the idea that a person you have known intimately—your own familiar friend—has been guilty of a dark and hideous deed. It is so natural to suppose that murderers are a race apart, bearing the brand of Cain upon their brow before as well as after the commission of their dreadful sin. But Cain was like other men before he lifted the club to slay his in-

poor brother. People who knew Mr. William Palmer of Rugeley declare that he was a most agreeable gentleman—the man of all others of whom a needy acquaintance would have sought to borrow a five-pound note; and men who went to school with Dr. Pritchard of Glasgow are fain to confess that he was like other boys, and played fly-the-garter and rounders as merrily as his companions. There is some turning-point of existence, perhaps, in which Satan lies in wait for his chosen victim; and until that point is reached the foredoomed traveller jogs along the road of life very much like other travellers.

All through that interminable Sunday Mr. Dobb revolved the same questions in his mind. How had Gervoise Catheron come by that fatal fifty-pound note? and how was he, Henry Adolphus, to account for the possession of it?

He could only do so by telling the truth about the abstracted money that had been hazarded on the fortunes of Twopenny Postman, and to do that would surely be ruin; for was Sloper, the man of iron, a likely person to forgive any act of dishonesty in his confidential clerk—a clerk who had to be trusted with the collection of precious sovereigns and shillings, and even bank-notes?

"I've a good mind to follow Catheron's example, and cut it," thought Mr. Dobb; but a judicious perusal of the Sunday papers had shown him that the clerks who run away by one train are generally brought back ignominiously by the next; and that to escape from any English port in the present day seems about as impossible as it was to escape from the Tower in the Middle Ages.

"I must face it out," thought Mr. Dobb. "Lord knows what will become of me!"

He dared not go to the barracks to inquire about Gervoise Catheron, for he had been too cruelly put to shame by the treatment of that gentleman's commanding officer. But he went to the tobacconist's, where there were military men lounging and smoking, and remarking to one another that it was a doosid bore a fellah couldn't play billiards on a Sunday; and where he heard animated discussions about the outrage in Scarsdale wood, and the lieutenant's desertion of his regiment. Nobody, however, thought of connecting the two events together.

In the evening Mr. Dobb had his reunion. He had enjoined Selina to utter no word relating to the bank-note that had been in his possession; and had indeed done his best to stifle that lady's fears by telling her that he in all probability made some mistake as to the number of the note. Having done this, he felt a little easier in his mind, and at dusk was pre-

pared to receive his friends with some show of his customary gaiety. But the evening seemed long and dreary to him ; and Spinner's song of "The Admiral" a shade more dismal than usual. Of course the attack upon Mr. Holroyde was freely discussed in this genial assembly, and all those ingenious theories which people delight in were duly expounded by different members of the company. The little assembly were terribly startled when, late in the evening, Mr. Dobb bounced suddenly out of his chair, and thumped his fist upon the table, crying,

"Oh, d—n ! we've had quite enough of this ! If you can't talk of anything but raw heads and bloody bones, you'd better shut up and go home."

The guests looked at one another aghast. Dobb was accustomed to be playful, and they were accustomed to submit to his playfulness even when it took the form of dry peas aimed at them from a pea-shooter ; but this was rude. Spinner helped himself to a glass of beer. When a man visits on the Yorkshire system he is obliged to protect his own interests.

"Bye, bye, Dobb !" said Mr. Spinner, when he had drunk his beer ; "and I hope the next time I have the pleasure of enjoying your society, I may find it rather more agreeable." And for once in his life the brilliant brewer's-clerk could find no words in which to retort upon his friend.

The fountain of Mr. Dobb's wit was frozen. Monday morning was so terribly near at hand now ; and his mental vision was absorbed by the image of Sloper, stern and questioning, as he would have to encounter it when he made his appearance at the office. He was too good a man of business not to know that the local bank would be one of the first places in which the detective would seek for the missing notes, and that the fatal fifty would be immediately traced to his hands.

It need scarcely be said that the buttered penny-roll which marked Mr. Dobb's Monday as with a white stone—for in the dismal monotony of the week's breakfasts at Amanda Villas a hot roll was quite an event—was pushed aside untasted by the wretched clerk. He tried to conceal his apprehension beneath a ghastly aspect of gaiety. He stuck his hat a little more aside upon his head than usual, and a man of the Dobb species *never* can wear his hat like a civilised being. He hummed a negro melody of an excruciatingly lively character as he walked to Sloper and Halliday's establishment ; and he twirled a little cane which he carried with an air expressive of intense gaiety of heart. But these heroic efforts were all in vain ; for an acquaintance who met him on his way told him that he was looking by no means "up to time ;" and the little looking-glass hanging in the corner of the office—the

glass before which he had perfected himself in the fanciful graces of "Tippetywitchet" and "Hot Codlins"—showed him a pallid countenance and wan faded eyes, that looked as if they had been simmered in warm water. He had not long to wait for his doom. He had seen a man hanging about the outside of the establishment, and had felt his blood turn to ice as the thought flashed upon him that the man might be a police-officer in plain clothes. But this suspicious looking man had allowed him to pass by unmolested.

He hung up his hat; and again the foul fiend took the opportunity of reminding him what a convenient peg that would be to hang himself upon. He placed himself before his desk and made an elaborate pretence of beginning work, but felt himself no more able to attend to the accounts of Sloper and Halliday than he was able to square the circle, or to surpass the late Professor Porson in the composition of Greek Iambics.

"It's no use," he thought with a groan; "I don't know whether the figures are upside down, but I do know that they look as if they were."

He made no further effort to employ himself, but sat with his head supported by his hands, a statue of despair. The junior clerk, Mr. Sparkins, looked askance at his superior. He knew that great man was in trouble, and he was not particularly sorry for his affliction. The mind of seven-and-twenty is apt to entertain despotic views with regard to underlings of seventeen, and Mr. Dobb had given his junior reason to know who was the master of that office. There had been no spoken hint of the clerk's disgrace, but unpleasant things have a subtle power of making themselves known. The voice of Mr. Sloper had been heard that morning calling for Mr. Dobb, and the tone in which he pronounced that name had been calculated to inspire terror in the boldest heart.

"Ain't you a trifle late this morning, Mr. Dobb?" remarked the young Sparkins; "the governor has been calling you ever so many times."

The office in which Mr. Sloper administered the affairs of the firm was a pleasant room situated on the other side of a courtyard which had once been a garden, but which was now devoted to the stowage of empty casks. The window of the principal's office was opposite the window of his clerk's office; and when his employer was at home, Mr. Dobb, busy at his desk, had the satisfaction of knowing that the eyes of that employer were on him, taking note of his industry, or keeping a sharp account of his idleness, as the case might be.

To-day the unhappy clerk was acutely conscious of that terrible presence in the office on the other side of the yard; nor

was he long allowed to abandon himself to the apathy of despair. A stentorian voice roared "Dobb!" and then there appeared at the window of the principal's office a rubicund visage, to which the signs of good living had imparted no jolly bacchanalian aspect, but rather a dark lurid crimson, such as might have dyed the countenance of a malignant satyr.

Mr. Dobb descended from his stool and went to his doom. He found his employer seated in confabulation with a grave-looking stranger, while young Halliday lounged with his back against the chimneypiece and his hands in his pockets. A copy of the placard which the clerk had seen posted on the dead walls and boardings of Castleford lay open on the table before Mr. Sloper.

"Dobb," said the gentleman, sternly, "a fifty-pound note, number 69669, was paid into the bank on Friday afternoon amongst the moneys which Mr. Halliday received from you on that day. That note was never paid to you in the affairs of this house. How did it come into your hands?"

There was nothing for the brewer's-clerk but to tell the truth. He turned very red, and then very pale, and stood for some moments twisting the buttons of his waistcoat round and round in his hot nervous fingers. Then he told his story—he confessed every thing; the money abstracted from the iron-safe to be wagered on the fortunes of Twopenny Postman; the promises which the lieutenant had made as to the liquidation of his friend's advance; the envelope containing the bank-note which the clerk had found on his desk early on Friday morning. Of course he told his story badly—stammering and contradicting himself, and trying back and nearly breaking down more than once in the narration; of course he insisted on backing-up his assertions with all manner of unnecessary details, and was more particular as to the accuracy of those details than the accuracy of the leading points of his story.

"We don't want to know about your picnic, or what this Mr. Catheron said about horse-racing," cried the angry Sloper, striking his heavy hand upon the blotting-pad before him: "we want to know how you came to embezzle money intrusted to you—intrusted to you by people who placed confidence in you, Sir, which they will never do again?"

The respectable-looking stranger here interposed, and suggested that perhaps Mr. Dobb had some letter from Mr. Catheron, received with the fifty-pound note.

But the clerk replied that there had not been so much as a line from the lieutenant.

"And that certainly looked a trifle piscatorial. Not that Catheron ever was much of a scribe," said Mr. Dobb, who was

beginning to recover himself a little by this time. It seemed as if the worst horror of his doom was over now that he had faced the terrific Sloper.

"Perhaps you have the envelope in which the bank-note was sent you?" said the respectable-looking stranger.

The costume of the Dobb tribe is provided with more pockets than any other style of dress. Henry Adolphus turned out the linings of seven or eight of these receptacles before it was quite clear to him that the envelope addressed by Gervoise Catheron was lost.

"This is the coat I had on, and this is the waistcoat," he said; "it's like my luck to lose that envelope."

"Pray don't give us any of your slang here, Sir," returned the angry Sloper. "A clerk who embezzles his employer's money in order to indulge in the degrading vice of betting on the turf can scarcely expect much *luck*, I should think. I'll tell you what it is, Mr. Dobb: this is a very black business. Here is a gentleman robbed and murdered—yes, Sir, murdered, for I hear there is no hope of this Mr. Holroyde's life being spared—a gentleman robbed and murdered, Sir, on Thursday night; and on Friday morning you deliver one of the notes abstracted from that gentleman to my partner Mr. Halliday. As for the story that you have just told us, Sir, I take upon myself to say that there is not one word of truth in it from beginning to end; and I ask you once more how that money came into your possession?"

But at this point the stranger interposed for the third time.

"I think that question had better be discussed elsewhere," he said. "Whatever Mr. Dobb says here may be used against him; and I must therefore beg him not to commit himself by any statement which he may hereafter wish to withdraw."

Henry Adolphus stared at the stranger in utter amazement.

"What do you mean?" he exclaimed indignantly. "I've been telling you the truth, and I don't mean to eat my words here or any where else. If Mr. Sloper chooses to proceed against me for having tampered with his money, why—why he must do so, and I can't help it; and it serves me right for having been fool enough to back that horse. But I think it ought to be remembered that it's the first time I ever touched a sixpence belonging to the firm, and that I've been a faithful servant—yes, and a precious hard-working servant too—for upwards of seven years."

"I am afraid this is a blacker business than embezzlement, Mr. Dobb," began the stern Sloper; but the stranger laid his hand upon that gentleman's arm with an authoritative gesture:

"Come, come, this will not do," he whispered ; and thereupon Mr. Halliday, who had been shuffling about during the whole of this conversation, now standing on one foot, now on the other, after the restless manner of a young gentleman who doesn't know what to do with himself, burst out indignantly :

"Oh come, I say, Sloper, and you too Mr.—Mr.—whatever your name is, Dobb's not the sort of fellow to be mixed up in the kind of business you're talking about. We've known him ever since he was a lad, you know, and we've always found him a very good fellow, and just the last man in the world to shoot another fellow through the back for the sake of three hundred pounds."

"What!" cried Mr. Dobb ; "does any one suspect *me* of having done that?"

The respectable-looking stranger, who was no other than the London detective who had been summoned to Scarsdale, stepped forward and produced a pair of handcuffs from his coat-pocket.

"I am sorry to say that I have considered myself justified in procuring a warrant for your apprehension," he said ; "but don't be down-hearted ; if you've told us nothing but the truth about your friend Catheron, I think I shall be able to see you through this. Perhaps, however, you may be able to prove an *alibi*."

"What time was the murder committed?" asked Mr. Dobb.

"Between nine and twelve o'clock."

"Then I rather *can* prove an *alibi*," cried the indignant clerk, "if our slavy doesn't make a fool of herself. My wife and I had a few words on Thursday morning, and made it up over an early supper on Thursday evening ; and it was half-past eight when the pot-boy from the Coach and Horses brought the supper-beer. I opened the door to him ; and I didn't put my nose outside Amanda Villas after that."

"And if you can't prove an *alibi*, Dobb, and they'll take bail for you, I'm ready to be one of your securities," said Mr. Halliday.

A fly was sent for. The handcuffs were dispensed with as an unnecessary degradation, inasmuch as Mr. Dobb was quite willing to appear before any tribunal whatever ; and the metropolitan detective managed every thing with such perfect discretion, that the clerk's removal to the house of the Roxborough magistrate was effected without *esclandre*. That important functionary had elected to hold a preliminary investigation at twelve o'clock that day, and the Scarsdale witnesses had been duly summoned. A solicitor, who had been a member of the Dobb circle, and one of the wildest roisterers of Roxborough some three or four years before, was sent for at

the clerk's request, to watch the proceedings on his behalf: and the maid-of-all-work, on whose evidence the *alibi* chiefly depended, was also summoned, and did her best to put her employer's neck in jeopardy by her persistent refusal to give straightforward answers, or to confine her speech to the subject in hand.

But in spite of this young lady, the evidence of the clerk's innocence of any overt share in the outrage was very plain, and Henry Adolphus departed from the magistrate's presence a free man, to find his wife in her strongest hysterics in the magistrate's-hall. And before Mr. Dobb had quitted the magisterial residence, the metropolitan detective had ascertained the exact train by which Gervoise Catheron had left Roxborough, and was speeding London-wards in hot chase of the wretched lieutenant.



CHAPTER XXXIV.

"RING OUT YOUR BELLS; LET MOURNING SHOWS BE SPREAD."

MR. HOLROYDE was dying. There was no longer the faintest ray of hope. The great surgeon—who flitted to and fro between London and Roxborough as if he had been some ominous bird-of-passage—and Sir Jasper's medical attendant, were agreed upon this point. On the very day in which the preliminary investigation was held by the magistrate, the London surgeon announced to Sir Jasper that his patient was sinking, and that any worldly affairs which Arthur Holroyde might have to arrange had better be arranged with all despatch.

"Is he still conscious?" asked Sir Jasper, who had only been permitted to see his guest once during the silent struggle between life and death.

"Yes. He is quite conscious. Your clergyman, who seems a most worthy person, though perhaps a little deficient in tact, has been with him several times; but I fear Mr. Holroyde is not a religious man. However, he received the clergyman with perfect courtesy, and did not seem averse to his presence. I asked him if he would like his lawyer to be sent for; but he said no—there were plenty of lawyers who would like to see him, but none whom he wanted to see. And then he asked me

if I remembered Lemaitre or Wallack as Don Cæsar de Bazan, and reminded me of that speech in which the doomed count predicts the lamentations of his creditors. A very singular man this Mr. Holroyde."

"A *persifleur*," said the Baronet. "I dare say he has lived a very pleasant life ; and now he is dying, alone—in my library, with all those grim pagan books surrounding him, and those stony pagan busts keeping guard over him—and with the exception of Deverill Slingsby, who has ridden over two or three times to make inquiries, nobody seems to care very much whether he lives or dies."

Sir Jasper pondered upon this more gravely than he had been wont to consider any thing within the few last years of his existence. The shadow of death in his house reminded him very painfully of that fell darkness which had come down on his life when his favourite daughter had been brought home from her fatal ride. So vividly indeed was that sad time recalled to him, that he by no means regretted the absence of the widow, who still kept her room—and was still suffering, she told Mrs. Browning, from that terrible nervous prostration which had been produced by the shock her too sensitive mind had undergone. This was what she said, or implied, in her discourse with the simple-minded housekeeper.

"The lively widow is an *article de luxe*," thought Sir Jasper ; "and there are times when a man's taste leans rather to sack-cloth and ashes than to the Sybarite's rose-leaves or the lotus-eater's voluptuous repose. What a strange thing life is—and death too ! How wonderful the two great enigmas which the universal sphinx propounds to the universal Œdipus, and which Œdipus has never yet been able to answer to his own satisfaction ! This man who is dying had something of my own philosophy ; and yet, now that he is dying, I pity him much more than I should pity that stammering curate of Marcia's if he were on his deathbed. I wonder whether Diderot and Voltaire were sorry for each other."

It was growing dusk on that autumn afternoon when Sir Jasper was summoned to the bedside of his sinking guest, at the request of Arthur Holroyde himself. The dying man was very feeble, but he was possessed of all his senses, and was quite calm. He begged to be left alone with his host.

"The doctors let me know some days since that there was very little hope for me," he said, as Sir Jasper seated himself by the bedside ; "but I have no very profound faith in the acumen of the medical profession, and I waited to see whether they had told me the truth. I know now that they were right. I have a very short time to live, Sir Jasper. First let me

remember my duty as a gentleman. I thank you—as heartily as a dying man can thank any body—for the hospitality you have given me. I might have died in a sponging-house, like Morland; or in a hospital, like many a better man that Morland; or like a dog in a ditch. It is much pleasanter to die in Scarsdale Abbey."

"I wish you could have lived in Scarsdale Abbey," said the Baronet kindly. "Until to-day I have hoped that I might see you ride away from this place as gaily as you rode that fatal night when you stopped at the curve of the avenue to wave us an adieu."

"Yes, I was a light-hearted dog enough when I did that; but when I ride away from Scarsdale next, I shall go feet foremost. The game of life has been pretty well played out for me, Sir Jasper; and perhaps I have some reason to be grateful to the unknown vagabond who snatched the cards out of my hand, and put an end to the play. I am old enough to remember Napoleon at St. Helena, and I once met Brummel at Caen. *That* is the way we brilliant fellows end our lives. But I have no breath to waste on philosophy. I have sent for you, Sir Jasper Denison, because I want you to help me to make the only atonement I can make for one of the sins of my life. You have been a rich man, Sir Jasper, and I dare say yours has been an existence of honourable prosperity. If I were not too grateful to be bitter, I should be inclined to tell you that it is easy for a prosperous man to be honourable. Were I a preacher, I would preach the antithesis of the familiar precept. It is your poor man who finds it so difficult to enter into the kingdom of heaven."

"Tell me how I can serve you, Mr. Holroyde, and I will give you the best service of my brain or my purse, whichever it may be you have need of," said Sir Jasper.

"If you knew me better, you would not offer me your purse," answered the sick man. "But I will be generous for once in my life. A week ago I should have been very glad to borrow your money: pile all the gold of California round my bed to-night, and these weak fingers will have no power to clutch one nugget of the precious ore. Sir Jasper, I have done many bitter deeds in my life—not such crimes as find their way into acts of parliament or criminal codes. I have wronged women and children; the friends whose hands I have clasped, knowing that I meant to do them wrong; the creditors who have trusted me; the shallow young dupes who have thought it a fine thing to choose me for their model; for was I not the dangerous Arthur Holroyde, the incorrigible Arthur Holroyde, the wicked irresistible Arthur Holroyde—just the sort of man raw youth is ready to imitate and worship? Lying in this

room, I have had plenty of time to consider my past life and to discover that it has been a mistake. The game has been rather a brilliant game; but, oh, the cruel waste of candles that might have lighted better things! But I have no time for moralising. In all the record of my wrongdoing, there is only one deed which I can in some measure atone on this my deathbed. If my crimes were not tolerably notorious—if I had any hope of descending to my grave in the odour of sanctity, I might die with sealed lips, for what I have to tell is a story of baseness, which you, Sir Jasper, as a rich man, can afford to despise. But I am the bad Arthur Holroyde, and any new revelation of my misdeeds will add little to my evil fame. When once a man enjoys so bad a reputation as mine has been, he may be hung half-a-dozen times and be none the worse for it. A person in this house told me of your acquaintance with a certain Mr. Pauncefort—an African traveller—an eccentric individual."

"Yes, I know him well."

"Do you know where to find him—to-day—now at once?"

"Unhappily, no. He left this place in July—I believe with the intention of going back to Africa."

"It has been suggested to me that he might possibly have remained in England, and that your daughter, Miss Denison, might be able to throw some light upon his whereabouts."

"My daughter!" cried Sir Jasper. "How should she know any thing about him?"

"Have you never had reason to suspect that between Mr. Pauncefort and Miss Denison there may have been something more than a common friendship? Women are very keen observers of one another. A lady has hinted the existence of an attachment between your daughter and the tenant of the Hermitage."

"The widow, of course," thought the Baronet. "What sly creatures these women are! The widow wants to marry off my daughter in order that she may have the coast clear for carrying out her schemes upon me. And my daughter preserves a serene appearance of lady-like indifference to my friend, while he and she are making love to one another under my very nose. What a world! what a world!"

Sir Jasper had time to make these reflections while Arthur Holroyde lay with his eyes closed waiting for strength to proceed with what he had to say. He had spoken in a very low voice; but even that effort overcame him for the moment.

"Sir Jasper," he said, laying his hand on the Baronet's arm, "I want to see this man—Pauncefort—I want to see him. I have wronged him more deeply, more deliberately than I ever wronged any one else; and I can in some measure undo that

wrong. If it is possible that your daughter may know where he is to be found, I earnestly entreat you to appeal to her."

"You shall appeal to her yourself," answered the Baronet. "She can refuse you nothing."

He rang a bell, which was answered by his own valet, who had helped to nurse Arthur Holroyde, and who was a most inestimable creature in sickness—a man whose movements were as the movements of a phantom.

"Let Miss Denison know that Mr. Holroyde wishes to see her, and that I wish her to come to Mr. Holroyde," said Sir Jasper.

The man bowed silently and departed. Five minutes afterwards Marcia was standing a few paces from the bed on which Arthur Holroyde lay. She had obeyed his summons without hesitation. The sublimity of death covered this man's wickedness as with a mantle, and there was no mercy he could have entreated of Marcia Denison which she would have refused to him.

"What hope could he have of a sinless Saviour's compassion if we his sinful fellow-creatures denied him our pity?" she thought, as she hurried to obey her father's desire.

"Miss Denison," said Arthur Holroyde, "I want to see the gentleman who has been known to you and your father as Mr. Pannecfort. If he is in England, and can be brought here in time to see me before I die, I may die easier, and he may live happier for the interview. He and I have been foes for more than fifteen years; but though he counts me as his worst enemy, he is ignorant of one wrong that I have done him—perhaps the worst wrong of all—a cold passionless bit of treachery that has put money in my purse at his expense—it may be at the cost of his happiness. If he is in England, Miss Denison, and if you have any clue to his whereabouts, for pity's sake do not withhold your knowledge from a man who will not be alive to profit by it to-morrow."

"Godfrey Pierrepont is in England," answered Marcia.

"Ah, you know his name then! She was right," murmured Mr. Holroyde.

"He is in England. He was here, in the grounds of this house, on Thursday evening. He may be at the Hermitage to-night."

"If he is here to-night, I shall say that Providence has brought us together. Do you know that Godfrey Pierrepont hunted me over in America for two years—hunted me like a wild animal, and would have killed me, perhaps, if we had met, as remorselessly as a hunter slaughters his prey? But I escaped him. I doubled sometimes, and went back to the places I had left, and heard how he had been there inquiring about

me. A kind of fatality seemed to protect me from him then. The same fatality brings me across his track now."

While Arthur Holroyde had been saying this, Sir Jasper had rung the bell; and again the inestimable valet answered his summons. A few words whispered to this person were enough and in ten minutes the valet himself had left the Abbey in search of the tenant of the Hermitage.

"Will you leave me now, Sir Jasper?" said Sir Arthur Holroyde. "If there is any chance of my seeing Pierrepont I had better save my breath for the story that I shall have to tell him."

So Sir Jasper and his daughter left the sick-chamber, and Mrs. Browning and the family-doctor reigned in their stead. Marcia and her father went to the yellow drawing-room, which seemed gloomy of aspect to-night, in spite of the bright furniture and the glowing fire, reflected upon encaustic tiles of white and gold. The Baronet groaned aloud as he drew a reading-lamp towards him and unfolded his *Times*. Marcia made no pretence of occupation, but sat looking at the fire with sad dreamy eyes. She had no expectation of any good to be derived from a meeting between Godfrey Pierrepont and the dying man, except such Christian forgiveness as a good man may accord his expiring enemy.

"I know he will be pitiful," she thought; "however long he may have brooded upon his wrongs, he will forget them in the presence of death."

She sat listening for the sound of Godfrey Pierrepont's footstep on the terrace; but there was no sound except the wailing of the autumn wind. Sir Jasper's servant returned in an hour, and came to the drawing-room to tell the result of his errand.

He had not found Mr. Pauncefort at the Hermitage. He had only found deaf Mrs. Tursgood, and had experienced considerable difficulty in obtaining any information from that lady. But he had ultimately ascertained that Sir Jasper's tenant had slept at the Hermitage for the last four nights, and had spent his days in wandering about the country, coming back long after dark, and letting himself in with a key when Mrs. Tursgood was locked in the slumbers of blameless old age.

"She doesn't seem to know whether Mr. Pauncefort is likely to come back to-night or not, Sir," said the valet. "I should think, therefore, the best thing we could do, Sir, would be to send a groom to the Hermitage, with orders to wait there for Mr. Pauncefort; and, if he comes back to-night, to bring him to the Abbey without loss of time. The old woman is deaf and stupid, you see, Sir, and it would scarcely do to leave things to her."

"Quite right, Hills," answered Sir Jasper. "Send the groom by all means. What a pity Pauncefort can't stay at home like a Christian!"

The evening seemed very long; the doctor and the nurse kept watch in the sick-chamber, where their patient lay very quiet, waiting with a strange serenity for the man he had wronged. In all the house that solemn silence which seems a twin-sister of death reigned supreme. In one of the upper chambers Dorothy lay in a slumber that was the best medicine for her fevered brain. In another chamber Blanche Harding paced to and fro with stealthy slippered feet, and a white anxious face unadorned by painted roses. More than once since Thursday night she had entreated to be allowed to see Arthur Holroyde. He was an old friend of her husband's, she told Mrs. Browning, and had been concerned in the adjustment of her husband's affairs. If his life were really in danger, it was quite necessary that she should see him.

The housekeeper had conveyed this fact to the family-surgeon, and that gentleman had it conveyed to Mr. Holroyde.

"Unless there is a very powerful reason for your seeing this lady I should most strongly recommend you to decline the interview," said the doctor; "so much depends upon your being kept quiet."

This had happened while there was still a faint ray of hope for Mr. Holroyde.

"There is no reason whatever that I should see her," the sick man answered coolly. "Pray tell Mrs. Harding that a man who has had a bullet through his lungs is in no condition for society, and beg her to leave me in peace. You will convey the request civilly, of course."

So Blanche Harding had not been admitted to the dying man's chamber. She had sent him three little notes, every one of which he had read attentively, and had torn into infinitesimal fragments after perusal. To the last of these he sent back a message to the effect that he would "think about it;" and with this very vague answer the widow was obliged to be content.

But she was not content. Some terrible fear seemed to oppress her; and she spent many hours in restless wandering to and fro her spacious chamber, the door of which was generally locked against intruders. She had kept her room ever since the eventful Thursday night; that "dreadful neuralgia" being an all-sufficient excuse for her retirement. Whatever this woman's history had been her life seemed to have reached some crisis now, while Arthur Holroyde lay dying in the room below her own. More than once she had stolen out of the corridor in

the dead of the night to listen for any sound in the sick room ; and on each occasion she had heard enough to convince her of the closeness of the watch that was kept there.

"I must see him," she said to herself ; "I *must* see him. Does he mean to play me false, I wonder ? It would be like him to do so. In all the old legedns of crime and horror there comes a time when the devil abandons his colleagues : and Arthur Holroyde has always been my idea of the devil."

On Monday morning Mrs. Harding was told that there was no hope for her husband's old friend. She had risen to take her breakfast that day—such a piteous pretence of breakfast as it was—and sat in an easy-chair by the fire, dressed in a loose morning gown of purple cashinere. But she still complained of neuralgia, and her face was deadly pale against the rich dark hue of her dress.

"Then there is no hope, Mrs. Browning ? " she said.

"None, Ma'am, as I understand from what our own doctor told me. The London doctor went away at eight o'clock this morning. We are to telegraph to him at four to-day, if there is any change for the better ; but Mr. Redmond told me that there was no chance of our having to send any such message, and that the London doctor knew as much. 'He won't come back again,' says Mr. Redmond ; 'and he knows that he won't.'"

"Will Mr. Holroyde be allowed to see any one to-day ? " asked Mrs. Harding.

"I don't know, Ma'am. I suppose if he wishes to see any one he'll be allowed to do so ; but he is very weak. He was light-headed in the night, and didn't know me or the doctor ; and oh, Ma'am, it is so sad to hear any one like that, talking about all sorts of places and singing little snatches of foreign songs, and talking foreign languages sometimes : but he's quite sensible this morning, and speaks so nicely to me and every one. 'You're a good creature, Mrs. Browning,' he said, 'and I know you very well this morning, though last night I took you for the man who was Pope thirty years ago, when I was a count of the Holy Roman Empire, and I saw you sitting in one of the state rooms of the—' there, Ma'am, I quite forget the name of the place he mentioned—'nearly seven feet high—and robed in white from head to foot, like a great marble statue ; and oh ! what a glorious fellow that Pope was, Mrs. Browning ;' he said ; 'and how nobly he hated the French ; and what happy days those Roman days were for me !' and then he sighed, Ma'am, as if his heart was breaking. Mr. Silbrook has been with him already this morning, and is with him still, I dare say ; and oh ! Ma'am, what a dear good patient creature that Mr. Silbrook is in such times as these !

He comes and goes, and he comes and goes as quietly as a shadow. 'Don't preach, my good fellow,' Mr. Holroyde said to him this morning; 'but sit there and read the New Testament to me; it is the most beautiful book that ever was written. Marat was reading it when Mademoiselle Corday stuck the dagger into his back; and I don't suppose I'm a much worse man than Marat.'"

This, with a good deal of trying back and considerable mispronunciation of proper names, was the account which Mrs. Browning gave of her patient. When she had paid her visit of duty to Mrs. Harding, and had retired to take some rest, while the chieftainess of the housemaids, who was middle-aged and experienced, took her place in the sick chamber, the widow sat staring at the fire, and thinking of what she was to do with herself.

"Some women would run away if they found themselves in my position," she thought; "but I will stay here till he is dead. If he keeps my secret faithfully, his death will be my release from slavery. If he betrays me—? Why even then, when the worst comes to the worst, I can run away. I am not afraid that Sir Jasper will denounce me; and I suppose Godfrey Pierrepont has really gone back to Africa."

But Mrs. Harding was prudent even when most daring. She devoted the better part of that morning to the task of packing her trunks, and stowed away her trappings and trinkets with as much care and neatness as if her mind had been free from anxiety. She even wrote the labels for her luggage. It was to be forwarded to the Pantechnicon—to be left there till sent for.

"If the very worst happens to me, that is a safe course," she said; "for it may be very necessary for me to avoid the chance of being traced. I can tell them here that my movements will be uncertain for the next few months."

The widow seemed a little easier in her mind after having made these arrangements. She dressed herself carefully in the costume which she had selected for her travels, should she have sudden need to leave the Abbey. Thus prepared at all points, and "equal to either fortune," she sat in her easy-chair waiting for her doom. The day was dark and dull, and all the four winds seemed to have made an appointment to meet one another in the woods of Scarsdale. The gaunt elms and poplars swayed to and fro with a dismal motion, as if they had been rocking themselves in a paroxysm of grief for Arthur Holroyde: and how nearly the wailing of wind in an ancient stone chimney can resemble the sobbing of a human voice in direst anguish, the woman who called herself Blanche Harding learned that day for the first time.

CHAPTER XXXV.

"I AM A SINNER VILER THAN YOU ALL."

EIGHT o'clock, nine o'clock, ten o'clock struck, and still Sir Jasper Denison and his daughter sat in the yellow drawing-room waiting for the coming of Godfrey Pierrepont.

Marcia sat very quietly, lost in a profound reverie as it seemed. She could not make any pretence of frivolous occupation at such a time. To her mind there was an awful solemnity about the meeting that was likely to take place between Godfrey and his bitterest enemy. By what various paths had these men wandered, to meet at last in an awful hour, in which all human anger, all mortal desire for vengeance, must die out beneath the dread influence of death! Ah, surely, the handy-work of Heaven appeared very palpably in the events of these few last days, in which Godfrey Pierrepont had been brought from the extremity of Europe by a lover's foolish fancy, while Arthur Holroyde's dark course was arrested by the hand of an assassin. Sir Jasper tossed about his papers and magazines in the restlessness of his spirit, as the solemn hours of that long evening crept slowly by. He cast furtive glances at his daughter every now and then, longing to penetrate the mysteries of her heart.

"What an inscrutable creature she is!" he thought. "I gave her credit for having a lump of solid ice in her breast where other women have the things they call hearts; and she has been in love with my dear old African traveller all the time! Why the deuce didn't they confide in me? I suppose Pauncefort was afraid his poverty would stand in his way. He is full of Quixotic nonsense, I dare say, and would not ask a woman to marry him unless he could produce a thousand of his own for every thousand of hers. I think I must look into this business; for if my African friend and Marcia would only make a match of it, I should be free to pair-off with the lively widow."

So, after skimming the cream of his newspapers and reviews, Sir Jasper took courage to address his daughter.

"Marcia," he said, "how does it happen that Pauncefort's name is not Pauncefort after all? You spoke of him as Pierrepont just now, when you were talking to poor Holroyde."

"His name is Pierrepont, papa. He told me his real name in confidence; I had no right to betray his secret."

"But why should he have any secrets, or why should he use

a name that is not his own? Is he in debt, and hiding from his creditors?"

"Oh, no, no."

"Then who the deuce is he hiding from?"

"From no one, papa. Pray do not question me about Mr. Pierrepont to-night. The secret he told me involved the history of his life, which is a very sad one. You will see him to-night, I hope; and if you question him yourself, I dare say he will trust you. Believe me, papa, he is a good and honourable man, and the mystery that surrounds his life has arisen from no wrong-doing of his."

"I can quite believe that," answered Sir Jasper; "and I'll only ask you one more question. Has Pauncefort—or Pierrepont—or whatever you choose to call him—ever made you an offer of marriage?"

"Never, papa."

"Humph," thought the Baronet; "I must see into this. I shouldn't mind playing the *Deus ex machinâ*. A grown-up daughter and a lively widow are *not* compatible."

It was past eleven when Godfrey Pierrepont went back to the Hermitage, where he found Sir Jasper's groom waiting for him. He had lingered in the neighbourhood, loth to leave the shelter of that woodland retreat in which he had first learned to love a good and noble woman. The solitary shelter was very dear to him: and though he had no hope of seeing Marcia again, he found it unspeakably difficult to tear himself away.

"My Asiatic exploration is forbidden me," he thought; "and I must endure my life amidst the din and glitter of civilisation. Sweet rural England—the dear land that holds her—is to be no home for me. Let me linger a little over my farewell. I will tramp the country-side about this place for a day or two, and then start on a waking-trip northward to Pierrepont. I should like to see the church beneath which my mother and father lie buried, and the garden where I played when I was a child. No one in Pierrepont will recognise any vestige of the lad they knew in my dark bearded face."

So once more the hardy pedestrian emerged from Scarsdale in the cold dawn of early morning; once more the untiring wanderer marched over desolate tracts of heathery common land under the autumn sky, and took his scanty meals in lonely hostleries, where a passing waggoner, or a drover tramping homeward from some distant market-town, were his sole companions. Once more Godfrey Pierrepont, the exile, felt the breath of English breezes, and looked tenderly upward to the cold clear blue of English skies.

Such pains had he taken during these few days to avoid all who knew him, that he had only heard the story of the outrage in the wood from deaf Dame Tursgood, who gave him a very bewildering version of the mischance which had befallen Sir Jasper's guest, and who could not tell him the name of that unfortunate gentleman.

"I think it was something beginning with a *ho*," said the old woman; "Ory—or Oroy—or something like that; but I *am* so hard of hearing."

Thus it happened that Mr. Pierrepont remained entirely ignorant of the neighbourhood of his foe. A thunderbolt falling at his feet from a serene sky could not have been more astounding to him than the intelligence which he received from Sir Jasper Denison's groom.

Mr. Holroyde was dying, and he was most anxious to see Mr. Pouncefort before it was too late. This was what the man had to say; and over and above this message there was a little note from Sir Jasper, containing these few lines:

"DEAR PAUNCEFORT,—Poor Holroyde can't last many hours. He wants to see you; and talks about making an atonement for some wrong he has done you. I suppose it's only a dying man's fancy; but it will be civil of you to come.—
Yours, J. D."

"How long is it since you left the Abbey?" asked Godfrey.

"I've been waiting for you here ever since seven o'clock, Sir. Would you like to take my horse, Sir? he's ready saddled. Shall I bring him round?"

"Yes. I will ride to the Abbey."

This was all Godfrey Pierrepont said. In less than five minutes he had mounted the groom's horse, and was galloping along the dark road by which Arthur Holroyde had left the Abbey. He found the park-gates open; the woman at the lodge had been told to be on the watch for his coming. "An atonement!" he thought; "what atonement can he give me for my blighted life?"

He saw the lighted windows of the library and the drawing-room as he stopped to dismount at the eastern end of the terrace. A man ran out from the stable regions at the sound of his horse's hoofs, and took the animal from him. Every arrangement had been made to facilitate his coming, and the servants were all on the alert to receive him. One of the drawing-room windows opened as he set his foot on the terrace and he heard the voice of Sir Jasper calling to him, "Is that you, Pouncefort?"

In the next minute he was in the lighted drawing-room—his eyes dazzled by the sudden change from the darkness. He

had scarcely time to be conscious of Marcia's presence, before the Baronet hustled him out of the room.

"Go to the poor fellow at once," he said; "Hills tells me that he has been asking about you ever so many times this evening."

Not one moment's pause in which to collect his thoughts was given to Godfrey Pierrepont before he was ushered into the chamber in which his mortal foe lay dying.

His mortal foe! Oh, what a feeble, helpless creature was that brilliant Arthur Holroyde, who had done so much mischief upon this earth! What a homily might have been preached upon that poor wreck of humanity, if an eloquent preacher had been there to utter it! Poor Winstanley Silbrook was not eloquent. He was only good and faithful: and he had been sitting in his corner by the bedside reading and praying with admirable patience and devotion through the evening, and had known no sense of weariness.

How many of those divine words fell on a stubborn heart and found no echo, or how far the wondrous wisdom of approaching death had enlightened the mind of the sinner, was a question that the curate did not venture to ask or to answer. The apostle has done enough when he has planted and watered; and with God alone rests the issue of the harvest.

In a moment—as if a great sea had arisen to devour them—Godfrey Pierrepont's vengeful feelings melted out of his mind. A mightier than he had taken Arthur Holroyde's destiny into His hand, and mortal vengeance fled away awestricken before the presence of Divinity.

"Sit there," said the dying man, "and let the room be cleared."

Curate, nurse, doctor, and valet disappeared from the chamber like obedient shadows, and Godfrey Pierrepont was alone with his wife's destroyer.

"I have not sent for you to ask your forgiveness," said Arthur Holroyde. "There are wrongs which no man can forgive, and the wrong I did you is one of them. You are a Christian, I am told; and when I am dead you will teach yourself to forget me. For the past I can do nothing; for the present, I think I can do something. If you were free to win another wife and create another home, would you have any inclination to do so?"

"God alone knows why you torture me by such a question," said Godfrey. "Yes, if I were free, I would choose another wife—I would seek to build another home."

"Then marry the woman of your choice—to-morrow if you please, Godfrey Pierrepont. Your wife has been dead more than a year."

"My wife—dead? Why I have seen her here—here—in this house—within the last year!"

"No, you have not. You have seen her twin-sister, Leonora Fane, who has been enjoying your pension since poor Caroline's death."

"Oh, God! can there be such villany in the world?"

"Yes," answered Arthur Holroyde; "necessity is very villainous. You have been a fortunate man; good things have dropped into your lap since you were young; good fortune came to you while you were still fresh, and true, and honest. I have been waiting for her all my life; and every year of my waiting has found me a worse man than I was the year before. Do you remember what the mad poet Cowper said?—'There is somewhere in infinite space a world that does not roll within the precincts of mercy.' That, Godfrey Pierrepont, is the sort of world in which penniless gentlemen live. You are rich, and I am an adventurer. The rich man is the adventurer's lawful prey; and I have preyed upon you. I am dying now, and I can afford to throw up the cards that I can no longer hold. I don't know whether I am sorry for what I have done, but I do know that I am ashamed of its baseness. I am an anachronism, Mr. Pierrepont. I was created to be a gentlemanly brigand, the terror and admiration of mediæval Europe; and modern society has obliged me to be a vulgar, plotting scoundrel. But I must not be discursive. A man who has been shot through the lungs has no time to waste on digression."

He carried himself with a certain air of gaiety even now. It was so much his nature to take things easily, that even the hand of death was scarcely strong enough to restrain the airy lightness of his manner.

"Your wife, Caroline Pierrepont, died at Naples," he said. "She had been declining for some time, and her sister had taken her from place to place in the hope of preserving a life which was worth fifteen hundred a-year to her. I met them at Ancona, and I saw the red danger-flag in Caroline's cheeks, and knew that she was dying of consumption. I think the sisters loved each other, and that Leonora was really distressed by the idea of losing Caroline. I met her one evening, after the doctor had pronounced your wife's doom, and she spoke of herself, and her future. 'When Caroline is gone, there will be nothing before me but the workhouse,' she said. 'I may drag on my life as a governess for a few years, if I can find any one who will accept my services with such a character as I can contrive to give myself; and then when I get old—there is the workhouse.'

"She said a good deal more in the same strain, and I was

really sorry for her. If I had been a rich man, I should have helped her with my purse, and should have left her happy in the consciousness of my own benevolence. As I had not a five-pound note that I could call my own, I could only assist her with my brains; and in doing so I committed a crime. That is one of the differences between wealth and poverty. 'All that you remark is perfectly true, my dear Mrs. Fane,' I said. 'You would be a pauper if Caroline died. But why should Caroline die? why should Mrs. Pierrepont, who has a comfortable annuity of fifteen hundred pounds, depart this life, leaving Mrs. Fane, who has not sixpence per annum, to lament her loss? especially when Mrs. Pierrepont and Mrs. Fane resemble each other so closely, that very few of their dearest friends would be able to distinguish one from the other. Would it not be better for poor Mrs. Fane to die of consumption, and for rich Mrs. Pierrepont to live on in the enjoyment of the annuity paid her by her husband's attorney, who is the simplest old fogie in Christendom, and who never leaves his own musty old office? Mrs. Pierrepont, who has been known on the Continent only as Mrs. Harding, has been leading such a wandering life lately, that the foreign doctors who have attended her, and the foreign hotel-keepers who have received her as their guest, can scarcely know her name. Why shouldn't she go somewhere else, where the foreign doctors and hotel-keepers will receive her as Mrs. Fane, and where, if she must die, she may die and be buried under that name?' I suppose you understand the plot now, Mr. Pierrepont?"

"Yes," Godfrey answered quietly. "I am sorry so much trouble was taken to deceive me; I would gladly have paid fifteen hundred a-year for my liberty."

"Ah, but we could not be sure of that, you see," Mr. Holroyde answered coolly. "We would have given you your liberty with great pleasure, if we had known you would have paid for it handsomely. Our little conspiracy was very easily managed. Poor Caroline was taken to Naples, where she was too ill to leave her own room. Leonora nursed her with the devotion of an angel, or a Sister of Charity; but she took care to let the doctors and the people at the hotel know that the invalid was Mrs. Fane, the widow of an Indian officer. Of course, if the doctor happened to address his patient by that name, it was the stupid fellow's mistake, and not worth dear Caroline's notice. She died a fortnight after her arrival in Naples, and was buried there under the name of Leonora Fane. Her sister left the place immediately after her death, and took care to avoid the old places in which they had been seen together."

"But, great Heaven," cried Godfrey Pierrepont, "the scar

—the scar which I remember on Caroline's arm ! One day when I was talking to the woman who pretended to be my wife, some scarcely palpable difference, the intonation of a word struck upon my ear, and for the moment I fancied I had been duped. But when I grasped the woman's arm, I saw the scar that had been familiar to me on the arm of my wife."

Mr. Holroyde shrugged his shoulders. "That's very possible," he said indifferently ; "Leonora is a wonderful woman, and it is not to be supposed she would allow so small a matter as a scar to baffle her ; and now, as the deception I suggested has lasted little more than a twelvemonth, I hope you will say something generous to me before I die."

For some minutes there was profound silence, while Godfrey Pierrepont sat motionless by the side of the dying man. Yet it may be that during the silence as earnest a prayer went up as any that was ever uttered aloud before assembled mankind. After that silent prayer, Godfrey turned to his old enemy.

"I hope that God will forgive you as completely as I do, Arthur Holroyde," he said.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

TWO LETTERS.

BEFORE day dawned upon the darkness of that night Sir Jasper's guest was dead ; and the dawn found Sir Jasper and his tenant closeted together in the yellow drawing-room, where all the glitter of pictures and *bric-à-brac* looked wan in the light of expiring candles.

Mr. Pierrepont had told his landlord the story of his wedded life, and the character of the lady then sheltered by the Abbey roof.

"I warned you against this person before, Sir Jasper," said Godfrey, when he had concluded the story of Leonora Fane's treachery.

"You did," answered the Baronet, with a deprecating gesture, "and I disregarded your warning ; and now you heap coals of fire on my head by interfering a second time to preserve me from the consequences of my own infatuation. My dear Pierrepont, you don't know what a demented idiot I have been. I was going to marry that woman. Yes, I was pre

pared to make one great gulp and swallow any thing in the way of antecedent history that she might please to invent for me. I knew that she was not a particularly good woman—one can hardly expect a brilliant creature like that to be particularly good, you know—but I liked her. She was agreeable to me; and you will allow that in the matter of millinery she is unapproachable. Good women are so apt to be neglectful of their millinery. They will not follow the precepts of those delightful Messieurs de Goncourt, and remember that an irreproachable creature is all the more delightful when she possesses the faintest *parfum de Lorette*. However, I must not forget to thank you for having given me this warning. The lively widow shall receive her *congé*. I shall miss her: yes, I confess that I shall miss her. But I shall write to Mr. Woods, to inquire if there is any thing of Rubens's or Etty's likely to drop into the market; and if there is, I'll run up to Christie's and buy it. In the mean time the widow shall go."

But Mrs. Harding, otherwise Mrs. Fane, did not wait to receive her *congé* from Sir Jasper Denison. When Mr. Hills took the Baronet his breakfast at two o'clock in the afternoon that succeeded Arthur Holroyde's death, he carried a dainty little patchouli-perfumed note on the tray, which he placed on the table beside his master's bed. The Baronet recognised the widow's dashing caligraphy. The hand had not trembled once, though the letter had been written immediately after Leonora Fane had been told that Arthur Holroyde and Godfrey Pierrepont were closeted together. The Baronet sighed plaintively as he perused the note, which ran thus:—

"DEAR SIR JASPER,—A letter received late this afternoon summonses me to town to the dear friend whose ill-health you have already heard of."

"I am afraid the 'dear friend' is only a genteel Mrs. Harris," thought the Baronet sadly. "What a pity a woman with such an outline should not be the sort of person a gentleman can marry!"

"This time," continued the latter, "I fear the case is *really serious*, and I have decided on leaving Roxborough by the first train, though, by so doing, I shall lose all chance of bidding adieu to you, and of thanking you with my own lips for all your goodness. How dear the memory of that goodness will be to me when I am far away from you and Scarsdale, I dare not trust myself to write now; for my heart is very, very sad, dear Sir Jasper, and something tells me that this separation between you and me may be a long one."

"Tears," murmured the Baronet, as he examined some pale smears upon the paper. "And yet I dare say tears are very

easy to produce ; I know too much of the tricks of the picture-dealers to be taken in by that sort of thing."

He went on with the letter :

"Farewell, then, Sir Jasper. I leave this dear dwelling with a gloomy foreboding of future sorrow. I have enemies—enemies whose dark machinations it would be vain to endeavour to explain. Better perhaps that I should rest under the dark shadows they may spread around me. I write wildly. I dare not read what I have written. I ask you to believe no good of me, Sir Jasper, except that the memory of you, and all that you have been to me, will be the most treasured recollection of my mind.

"Ever gratefully and faithfully yours,

"BLANCHE HARDING."

"P.S.—A letter, with the old Maida-Hill address, will always reach me. My luggage I have left to be sent to the Pantechnicon, as my movements for the present are very uncertain."

"What a wonderful woman!" thought the Baronet; "throughout her letter there is not a word that commits her to any thing, good, bad, or indifferent. And she reminds me that the old address will always find her. Circean charmer! If I were a weak man, that letter would make a fool of me. As it is—well—I must never trust myself in the neighbourhood of Maida Hill."

There was another letter delivered in Scarsdale Abbey that morning—a letter which one of the women-servants carried to Miss Denison's room long before Sir Jasper's own man presumed to disturb the Sybarite slumbers of his master.

Marcia's heart thrilled as she recognised Godfrey Pierrepont's handwriting. She knew nothing of the nature of that interview which had taken place between Godfrey and the man who now lay dead in the darkened chamber below. She only knew that they had been closeted together for upwards of an hour, and that there had been peace.

"His farewell letter!" she thought sadly, as she tore open the envelope.

But it was not a farewell letter; it was a lover's letter, written with all the freedom of a hand that is not forbidden to betray the secrets of its master's soul.

"MY OWN BELOVED!" wrote Godfrey Pierrepont,—*"I dare call you thus now; I dare call you any thing that is tender and sweet; and in all the world you are the only creature who has any right to bid me hold my hand. Oh, Marcia, my pen would fain run riot over the paper, so wild an impulse moves it*

as I write to you to-night. But the shadow of death is close at hand, and I must needs be saddened a little by that solemn influence.

"My own one—my own one—my precious wife that is to be in the dear days that are to come! The barrier that separated you and me was never any more than a lying shadow. When I fancied myself divided from you by an impassable abyss, I was only the dupe of a shameful conspiracy. I was a free man, dearest, when I first looked in your sweet face, first saw the graceful figure in the warm glow of the firelight, and heard the rustling of your dress.

'In your lonely silken murmur, like an angel clad with wings.'

I was a free man, Marcia! I might have fallen on my knees in the firelight that autumn evening to beseech you for my bride. I might have done any thing that is mad, or wild, or desperate. I don't suppose I really did love you then, though I cannot remember a time in which I did not love you.

"I am not going back to St. Petersburg. The steppes of Siberia, the Caucasus, the Amoor, and the Chinese Wall may be swallowed in an earthquake, so far as I am personally concerned in their preservation. I am going north, but no farther north than Pierrepont, where there is a mouldy old castle, that must be made ready for a fair young châtelaine. Ah, what happiness to let loose the decorators and upholsterers, and cry havoc upon moths and dust! What happiness to prepare a beautiful nest for my dove! What unutterable joy to begin a new existence in the place where my name means truth and honour; and to know that no ghost from the old life can arise to overshadow my bliss!

"I cannot tell you what my movements may be for the next few weeks; it will be so difficult for me to stay away from Scarsdale. But I have all my new life to plan. Oh, Marcia, it is like a resurrection from the grave!"

"In any case, I shall not come near the Abbey until that unhappy man has been laid peacefully in his grave. He dies so friendless and lonely that the doctors whom your father pays will be the only followers in his funeral train; unless, indeed, Colonel Slingsby cares to pay a last poor tribute of friendship to a boon companion. I am sure it will please you to know that we parted in peace, and that I was able to forgive him as freely for the wrong he has done me as I hope my own errors to be forgiven.

'And now adieu, my own one; and this adieu is no sad farewell, but only the pretty flimsy word which means a brief good-night. I shall write to you to-morrow from Pierrepont. Will you send me one little line to the Castle, to tell me you

have not suffered very much by the catastrophe that has brought gloom and death within your doors? One little line in the hand I love will seem like a pledge of that future happiness which is so bright a thing that I tremble lest it should be too fair and beautiful a vision ever to be more substantial than a day-dream. I have told your father my history, and have his best wishes for the prosperity of my suit; so I dare to sign myself your faithful and adoring

GODFREY."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"AFTER MANY DAYS."

GODFREY PIERREPOINT'S day-dream has been realised in the years that have gone by since the death of Arthur Holroyde; and other children play now in the old-fashioned garden which is only divided by a low boundary-wall from the hidden graves of a forgotten churchyard. The orchards and gardens of the Grange are the favourite playground of the children from the Castle. The little ones like the apples on those old espaliers better than any fruit that is grown in the prim kitchen-gardens of the loftier domain. They prefer the grassy lawn and the cottage-flowers, the sweet-williams and London-pride, the stocks and mignonette, and the glorious cabbage-roses which were the chief joy of their dead grandmother, to all the grandeurs of the Castle pleasaunce, where stately peacocks screech at them, and where solemn gardeners look unhappy if a stray leaflet is dropped on the smooth gravel.

Happy children, on whose fair young heads all Fortune's gifts fall in a golden shower! Happy children, whose name in the place of their birth is synonymous with nobility and honour! Happy children, about and around whom there breathes so pure an atmosphere of love that the young faces seem still to reflect the brightness of the angels who have smiled upon them in their baby-dreams!

And while the children play in the gardens of the Grange, Marcia and Godfrey are sometimes away in London; for the name of Pierrepoint is fast becoming a power in the ranks of the more advanced of English Conservatives; and more than once in the course of every session Sir Jasper Denison has the pleasure of reading some grand speech of his son-in-law's commented upon in his favourite *Times*.

Godfrey Pierrepont has indeed begun a new life. Love, ambition, success—all the brightest flowers that make the crown of existence—blossom now for him, for him. And sometimes in a dream he fancies himself on the burning shores of the white Nile, and wakes in a feverish terror to remember his desolate youth, and to thank God for the gladness of his manhood.

And when the session is over, and he is free to fly back to the children at Pierrepont, the grave African wanderer of the past, the earnest senator of the present is transformed all at once into the lightest-hearted boyish traveller who ever sped northwards by express-train. In the Grange gardens, where he played in his childhood, he plays now with his children: and lying on the grass with the latest parliamentary reports open under his elbow, he is disturbed by tiny flaxen-haired toddlers, who insist on being taken to Banbury Cross, or enlightened as to the proceedings of that celebrated family of pigs whose leading member went to market.

Is it necessary to say that the Pierrepont poor rejoice in the residence of their chieftain and his tender-hearted wife, or that the Castle is a land flowing with milk and honey for the surrounding peasantry? There are strong-minded ladies in the neighbourhood, who threaten Marcia with the direful effects that are likely to arise out of her undiscerning charities; but Marcia pleads that if she waited to find faultless recipients for her benevolence, she should never give to any body.

"I am very sorry that James Price will not attend *Me* two services, Miss Warlock," she replies to an importunate lady; "but I hear that he is a good husband and a most affectionate father, and that his drowsiness after dinner is really constitutional; so I don't see any reason for withholding the new milk that his children are allowed to have from the Castle dairy."

Mrs. Pierrepont has a trusty ally in her own particular curate, Mr. Silbrook, on whom the Pierrepont benefice was bestowed when the old incumbent died. He came to Yorkshire, delighted to return to his old slavery, and as happy to serve Mrs. Pierrepont as he had been to wait upon the footsteps of Miss Denison. He loves her still; but in his soul love is so pure a flame that it burns with as subdued and steady a radiance as the deathless lamp on a Roman-Catholic altar.

Sir Jasper comes often to Pierrepont; and he makes his son-in-law's town-house his head-quarters when he has occasion to attend Christie's auction-room. He likes his grandchildren amazingly—from a good point of sight. "Place them on a

level with my eye, and let me get a north-west light upon them," he says entreatingly, as he hands the little ones back to their nurses. "Yes, quite equal to Sant—very transparent and pearly. I shouldn't be surprised if that boy were to develop into a Gainsborough; and if he does, I shall leave him the whole of my fortune. You will not let him disturb my Ettys when I am dead and gone, will you, Pierrepont? I think I should turn in my grave if any wretch were to put my Psyche in a bad light."

With the children in the Grange gardens there is some one who is not a servant, and yet not quite a governess—a gentle tender creature, who idolises the little people with whom her life is chiefly spent, who is very apt to call Mrs. Pierrepont "Miss Marcia," and whom the Castle servants address respectfully as Miss Tursgood.

Poor Dorothy's brief romance has ended in sudden darkness. She knows that the verdict of the coroner's jury which branded Gervoise Catheron with the name of a murderer was only too just a decision: and every night in her prayers she thanks God for his escape from the hangman's hand, and prays that his penitence may be received by Divine mercy.

He escaped the hangman. Another man, careful of his life, winding and twisting in accordance with some deep-laid plan of cheating justice, might have fallen into the very jaws of his pursuers. Gervoise Catheron, utterly careless of his wretched existence, and flying blindly, rather in some wild hope of escaping from his own remorseful conscience than with any idea of evading the consequences of his crime, managed to baffle the sharpest of metropolitan detectives, the most determined of provincial police.

He left Roxborough by the mail-train on the very night of the murder, and went straight to Liverpool by an early express on the following morning. Chance, favouring him who was reckless of his life, as she never favours the man whose dearest hope is to preserve his existence, afforded him an immediate opportunity of escape from England. One of the Cunard steamers started for New York on the very day of his arrival in Liverpool: and Gervoise Catheron, with a portmanteau of ready-made garments, bought of a Jew in a back-slum of the town, started with her. The Jew was quick to see the account of the Scarsdale murder, and the numbers of the missing notes, and to compare these numbers with the money he had taken from the pale traveller, who bought his goods in such a hurry. The Israelitish merchant sent the suspicious notes abroad, and was dumb with regard to Mr. Catheron's visit to his establishment. The detective searched Liverpool in vain

for any clue to the lieutenant's movements. The papers which he examined in the ship-brokers' offices afforded no evidence strong enough to justify action. So he went back to London, baffled and disheartened, to be sent down to Leeds to investigate a great forgery case, which promised to be even more important than the Scarsdale murder.

Dorothy was three-and-twenty years of age, and Godfrey and Marcia had been married five years, when there appeared in the American correspondence of the London newspapers an account of the death of a poor half-starved creature, who had picked up his miserable living as a card-sharper and billiard-marker, in the vilest haunts of New York, and who on his wretched deathbed confessed himself the murderer of Arthur Holroyde. His confession had been duly attested by the authorities, who were summoned at his own special entreaty; and the very words of that confession were made public.

"He had injured me and mine," said the dying man, "and I hated him. I was mad and desperate for want of a certain sum of money, and I knew that he had six times that sum about him, and that the money in his possession ought by rights to have been mine. I did not think much about what I was going to do; but I put a loaded pistol in my pocket, and I went to the wood through which I knew he must pass, and lay quiet among the fern waiting for him. When I heard his horse's hoofs, I got up, and climbed upon a bank that overhung the road. From this bank I took my aim; he groaned once, and fell off his horse. I found the money I wanted in his waistcoat-pocket—the only one of his pockets which I touched. I did not wait to see whether he was dead, but went back to Castleford, where I had some business to transact, and from there to Roxborough, where I reached the station three minutes before the departure of the mail-train."

To Dorothy this was a very sad story; but she has learned to take some comfort from the hope that her lover died penitent. And though the smiles and dimples of eighteen are missing in the gentle young woman of three-and-twenty, there may come a time when the old wounds will heal, and new happiness may rise for poor Dorothy from the ashes of her dead. One may venture to hope so much for a broken-hearted young person of three-and-twenty.

Dorothy goes southward once a-year to see her own family, and on these occasions she always meets her Cousin Selina and the lively Dobb; but she does not care to go near Amanda Villas, where the memory of her lost lover afflicts her with cruel anguish. The Dobbs are prosperous, for the stern Sloper has discovered by bitter experience that there are

not many clerks to be had as sharp or as trustworthy as Henry Adolphus, and the repentant Dobb has taken the lesson of his youth very deeply to heart, and would as soon enter into a compact with the foul fiend as he would involve himself in any sporting adventure with the knowing ones of Farringdon Street or the Peter-Piper tavern. Sloper and Halliday have increased his annual stipend by thirty pounds, and the Sunday evening reunions are more frequently wound-up by cold baked meats than of old, while Mr. Dobb's "Tippettywichee" and "Hot Codlins" are more like the real thing than ever.

And while domestic happiness reigns alike amidst the grandeurs of Pierrepont Castle and in the lowly chambers of Amanda Villas, a haggard pensioner on Godfrey Pierrepont's bounty haunts small German spas, and loses her pitiful stakes at third-rate gambling-tables. Her name is Leonora Fane, and she lives upon a hundred a-year, which is sent to her in quarterly instalments by Godfrey's lawyers, for Marcia and her husband would fain secure this wretched woman from the necessity of sin. She accepts the dole churlishly enough, and hates the giver: and if in the out-of-the-way places where she drags out her existence any mention of Godfrey Pierrepont's parliamentary triumphs, or his wife's social graces happen to reach her ear, the ghastly painted face contracts spasmodically and the false eyebrows lower over dark angry eyes. She is a slave tied to the chariot-wheels of Nemesis, and the Goddess of Vengeance seems loth to lose her hold upon her victim. For women who have sinned and suffered, Death sometimes comes in the guise of a kind and pitiful friend and releases the bonds of their captivity. But death will have nothing to do with Leonora Fane: her day of repentance or release is still in the future.

THE END.



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